# The New Criterion

June 1995

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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**Marsden Hartley**

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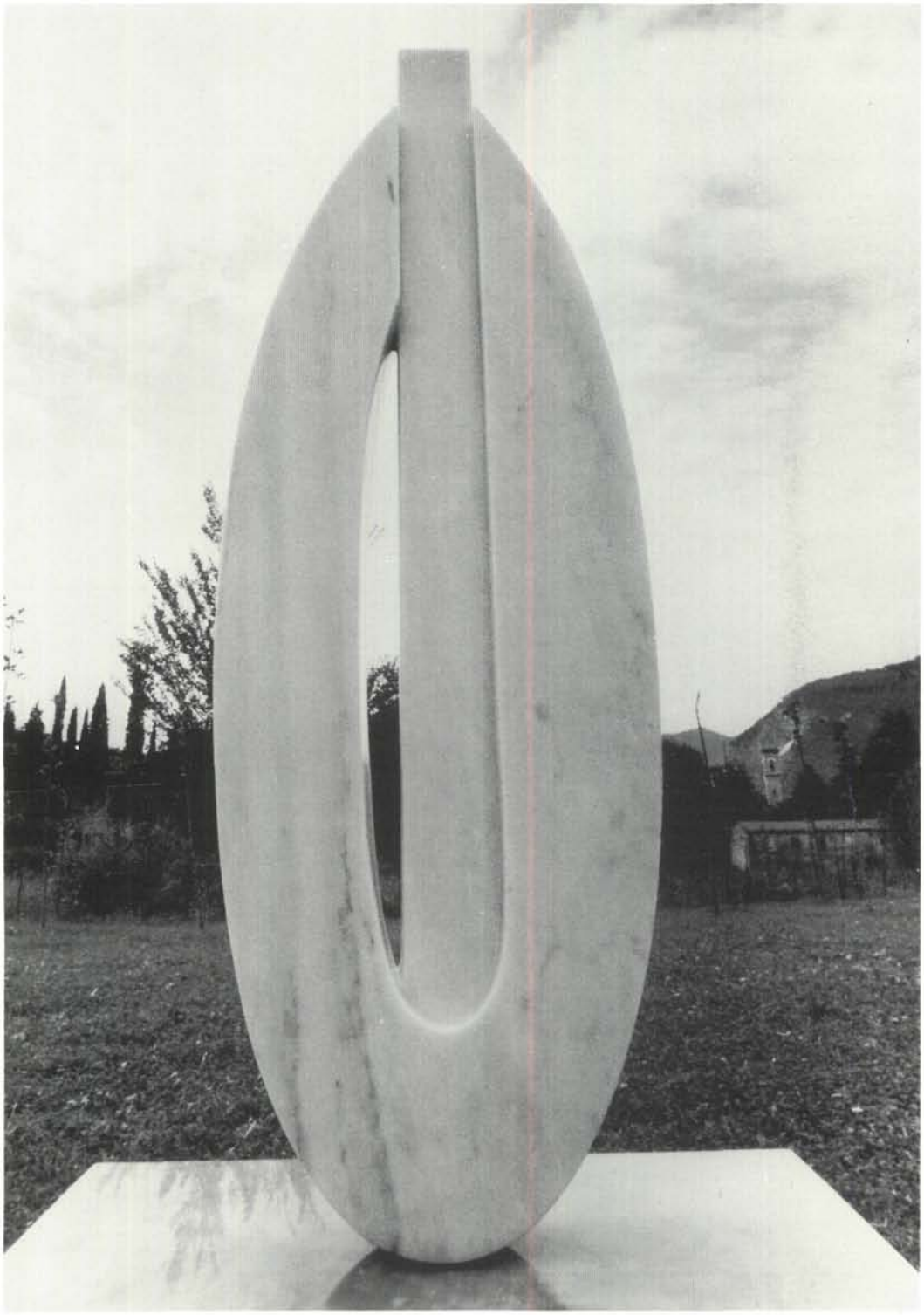

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# Notes & Comments: June 1995

## *Peter Brooks's complaint*

In the thirteen years that *The New Criterion* has been in existence, we have often had occasion to criticize the depredations of multiculturalism and political correctness. Indeed, even before the terms "multiculturalism" and "political correctness" gained currency, in the mid- to late-1980s, we frequently inveighed against efforts to enlist the arts and humanities in the subversive political campaigns of the cultural left. That those efforts have been largely successful—that they have managed to transform the art world and large precincts of the American university into hotbeds of ideological activism—is now a fundamental datum of our cultural life.

We appreciate that "hotbeds of ideological activism" is a contentious way of putting the matter. But our experience convinces us that it is accurate. Moreover, we have discovered that a more delicate phraseology is not so much conciliatory as feckless: an invitation to discount the seriousness of the issue. The dictum that "everything is political"; the assumption that the real albeit often unacknowledged goal of intellectual activity is the acquisition or consolidation of power, not knowledge; the acceptance of the most degraded products of popular culture as suitable objects of academic scrutiny; the insistence that issues such as race and sexuality be regarded primarily as ideological litmus tests—these are among the cherished dogmas that fuel multiculturalism and political correctness. The effect of such dogmas has been ruinous. Their gradual institutionalization—in the academy, in the museums, in the media, and elsewhere—has done much to distort and coarsen cultural life, reducing it to a coefficient of one or another ideological cause. Only now is the full extent of the intellectual and spiritual wreckage becoming evident.

Over the years, we have done our best to provide readers with a series of damage reports, anatomizing some of the more glaring casualties in what have come to be called the culture wars. We have not been alone in this effort. While the official custodians of culture and academic life have continued to capitulate to the multicultural onslaught, numerous critics have emerged to challenge the new orthodoxies. It is hardly surprising, we suppose, that partisans of the multicultural imperative have regarded such critics as interlopers, and have accordingly treated them with varying degrees of disdain and rancor. Nevertheless, the concentrated fury of the response has been noteworthy.

A case in point was afforded by *The Times Literary Supplement* in the special issue it published at the end of May on "Cultural Studies." For many of us, the fact that so venerable a literary organ as the *TLS* should have devoted respectful attention to this Marxist-inspired celebration of popular cul-



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ture is itself a melancholy sign of the triumph of multiculturalism. What, after all, does it mean that the *TLS*, once one of the most serious literary reviews in English, should emblazon its cover with a large orange muppet? What does it mean that its featured article should be "The Zipper Unzipped," a long, flattering piece about the cultural history of the zipper? That among its main articles should be a favorable notice of *Barbie's Queer Accessories*, a book about Barbie dolls by an "art historian and lesbian activist" named Erica Rand? (If you have ever wanted to ponder children's toys "*in the light of Antonio Gramsci's theory of* hegemony," here is your chance.) None of this is good news.

But the piece that most captured our attention was "Frightened with False Fire: Misunderstandings of the Culture Wars," by the Yale professor Peter Brooks. Readers of *The New Criterion* will perhaps remember Mr. Brooks, for we have had occasion to criticize him more than once. A professor of French and sometime director of the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale, Mr. Brooks is a walking epitome of the new academic orthodoxy in its mandarin, full-professor variety. And although he has receded somewhat from the scene lately, Mr. Brooks still crops up from time to time to castigate critics of multiculturalism and political correctness as know-nothing right-wingers who have no business venting their opinions in public.

The latest spur to Mr. Brooks's ire was *Our Country, Our Culture: The Politics of Political Correctness*, a collection of some two dozen brief essays on political correctness reprinted from a special issue of *Partisan Review*. Since the editors of *The New Criterion* and several contributors to its pages are represented in this volume, we turned to Mr. Brooks's animadversions with considerable interest. He did not disappoint. With Pavlovian predictability, he complained that the book is "essentially repetitious mouthings of conservative indictments of the culture of the universities." Under the editorship of William Phillips, he said, *Partisan Review*, though once a "fiercely independent" organ of the left, had lamentably drifted "rightwards" and was now, sad to say, "most comfortable in the company of *The New Criterion* and *Commentary*."

Mr. Brooks indulges in a bit more throat-clearing, criticizing Mr. Phillips for resorting "to the language of patriotism"—behavior that he regards as "a sad measure of *Partisan Review*'s current stand." (Mr. Phillips had written that the academic left, although not exactly Marxist, was "to a large extent anti-American, *in some quarters anti-capitalist*, pro-third world, pro-minority, and anti-Western [in its] cultural and political interests"—can Mr. Brooks seriously dispute this?) When he finally gets around to the subject of political correctness, Mr. Brooks favors us with a little dance. He himself is not an advocate of P.C. Indeed, he regards the politically correct effort to legislate virtue as "clearly misguided and pernicious, however well intentioned the motives." About affirmative action, he even says that "any concept of preferment on bases other than intellectual merit appears hostile to the very definition of the university." We would agree.

But then Mr. Brooks takes it all back. Really, he says, the threat of political correctness is a chimera invented by the right. Never mind that scores of books and articles have provided a vast inventory of P.C. horror stories: Mr. Brooks assures readers of the *TLS* that "the same few examples are constantly recycled . . . because there aren't all that many to choose from." Moreover, he says, "the P.C. phenomenon" was "always exaggerated" by the cultural right and then "given a spin by such as the newsweeklies, which are increasingly hostile to the culture of the universities as a whole."

"*Such as the newsweeklies* . . ." This is one of Mr. Brooks's favorite gestures of dismissal. Earlier, he had referred to "particularly savage" pieces in *Our Country, Our Culture*



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by "such as Heather Mac Donald, Ronald Radosh, Alan Wolfe"—as if these distinguished writers were something the cat brought in. Such arrogance has long been a staple of Mr. Brooks's criticism. In *Speaking for the Humanities*, a notorious pamphlet he co-authored for the American Council of Learned Societies in 1989, he contemptuously referred to non-academic critics as "amateurs—belle lettrists who unselfconsciously sustain traditional hierarchies, traditional social and cultural exclusions." As the English critic John Gross noted apropos this passage, what Mr. Brooks and his co-authors reject is the very "possibility of a serious critic operating outside the academic fold."

Mr. Brooks's smug attitude toward critics without guild certification betokens a distasteful snobbishness. It is, however, a corollary of his evident—and eminently politically correct—assumption that the university is simply more progressive, more virtuous, than the rest of society: American universities, he says, "have tried to address issues of racial tension, gender inequality and sexual orientations once defined as 'deviant,' in a way that society as a whole is not yet willing to take on." Not yet. But someday "society as a whole" will perhaps be enlightened by—may we say it?—such as Mr. Brooks.

Yet more troubling than Mr. Brooks's arrogance is the vision of the humanities that informs it. He explains that after World War II, the American university expanded rapidly and became "more serious, and inevitably more specialized." American society, he says, was "willing to allow hard scientists to pursue their research wherever it might take them." It even gave social scientists a large dispensation. But somehow, Mr. Brooks complains, society expected the humanities "to remain the place of the good and the true, a kind of timeless contemplation of the best that has been thought and said (the cultural right is fond of citing Matthew Arnold)."

Of course, Mr. Brooks's description is meant to be a caricature, as if "the good and the true" and "the best that has been thought and said" were just too impossibly twee to be taken seriously by any academic worth his salt. But think about it. Why do we value the humanities? By bringing science into the equation, Mr. Brooks implies that the knowledge humanists purvey is analogous to that provided by science. Is it? Certainly, there are facts to be ascertained in the humanities: for example, who wrote what when and where. But at its core the humanities are not akin to science. They do not progress. They provide us with no predictive power. The knowledge they give us is not first of all factual or instrumental knowledge but knowledge of the human heart. The humanities are important because, as Aristotle put it, they teach us appropriate "habits," appropriate modes of feeling. That is to say, the humanities are part of what used to be called, without apology, moral education. This is something that Mr. Brooks and other advocates of the multicultural university have entirely lost sight of—something, indeed, that they would actively disparage. Mr. Brooks worries that the "compact between American society and its universities" has been breached by the culture wars. He is right. But that is largely because most people outside the academy do not believe that books like *Barbie's Queer Accessories* or the inanities of deconstruction and post-structuralism are worthy examples of the humanistic enterprise.

Mr. Brooks concludes bitterly with the hope that "now that a noisy and rambunctious right has taken over the legislature, its cultural pundits will feel reassured, turn to their regressive social programme, and leave the universities alone." Alas, it is not the "cultural pundits" who are to blame for the devastation of the American university, but the politically correct advocates of multiculturalism and other politicized fads—such as Mr. Brooks—who have betrayed the humanities.



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# The BBC & other losses

## *by Hilton Kramer*

*. . . in the presence of the Englishman, when by chance he turns up or is thought of, there is an invincible impatience and irritation that his point of view should be so fixed, his mind so literal, and the freight he carries so excessive (when you are sailing in ballast yourself), and that he should seem to take so little notice of changes in the wind to which you are nervously sensitive.*

—George Santayana, in *Character and Opinion in the United States*

A few weeks before I revisited London in late April, there appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement* one of those periodic assaults on American cultural life that are written by visiting English dons for the sole purpose, it sometimes seems, of making a sort of atonement for the large lecture fees they are embarrassed to be seen collecting on this side of the Atlantic. Perhaps it is a way of demonstrating that they haven't been bought—or is it only a last dying ember of that blazing, unapologetic snobbery that was once so standard a feature of English visitors to our shores? This particular assault was the work of John Gray, and took the form of a fatuous review of James Q. Wilson's *The Moral Sense*, which was judged to be a failure not only as "a contribution to moral theory" but even as "an exercise in cultural criticism." In the U.S., Mr. Gray is—or once was, anyway—thought in certain circles to be some sort of conservative political thinker. Yet on this occasion his primary purpose was clearly to register his disdain for the entire literature of "neo-conservative cultural criticism in the United States," not only Mr. Wilson's, and for its allegedly "Americocentric limitation" as well as what was said to be its deplorable addiction to "the ephemera of current American controversy."

> It is notably uncommon [wrote Mr. Gray] to find neo-conservative writers asking why the cultural disorders they diagnose are so peculiarly prominent in the United States, and do not affect in anything like the same degree other modern societies.

That "we are engaged in a cultural war, a war about values," as Mr. Wilson accurately wrote, is a notion that Mr. Gray treated with derision, and he dismissed the principal "argument" in *The Moral Sense*, which he never condescended to elucidate, on the grounds that it was "dominated by the local and transitory context of recent debates in America." The obvious implication of the piece was that at home English cultural life has remained blissfully uncontaminated by the "debates" engendered by the kind of "cultural war" that is tearing American society apart and that it was Mr. Wilson's purpose to illuminate in his book.

You don't have to have been as regular a visitor to England as I have been in recent years to know that Mr. Gray's claims in this regard are either woefully uninformed or



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deliberately misleading. You need only have followed the recent shifts in the ideological perspective of the *TLS* itself to have had a frontline view of the intellectual combat that has now established the cultural war as a conspicuous feature of English intellectual life. (See, in this connection, "Peter Brooks's Complaint," on page 1 of this issue.) And indeed, Mr. Gray's review of *The Moral Sense* was nothing if not a minor skirmish in that cultural war. It is difficult to believe, moreover, that Mr. Gray is not aware of the fact that the entire phenomenon of "cultural studies," which has played a large role in the cultural war by reducing all critical analysis of the arts and the humanities to a species of left-wing political anthropology, had its origins in the English provincial universities, from which it has been exported to America with disastrous results. If he is really oblivious to the contributions made to what he describes as "the cultural disorders" on both sides of the Atlantic by Terry Eagleton, Perry Anderson, Martin Bernal, and certain other of his intellectual compatriots, then Mr. Gray should disqualify himself from entertaining opinions on these matters.

When one looks at these "cultural disorders" from a London perspective, certainly, it is quickly apparent that it is Mr. Gray, rather than the American neoconservatives he castigates, who is hopelessly "Americocentric" in his assessment of the current cultural situation. For the culture wars, as we have come to call this melancholy phenomenon in this country, are being fought on many fronts in Britain today, and declarations of denial like Mr. Gray's readily identify themselves as acts of appeasement to the cultural left. If there is a significant difference between what is happening in the United States and the way the culture wars are currently conducted on Mr. Gray's home ground, it may be found in the conspicuous absence there of any organized conservative resistance to the devastation that is already in progress. Individual voices have been eloquent in their dissent, to be sure—Roger Scruton's, for example, or Paul Johnson's, which usefully identified the cultural left's contribution to "cultural disorders" in Britain as a species of "liberal fascism." For the most part, however, the British response to the culture wars has been characterized by an abject pusillanimity. Its political model has been Sir Isaiah Berlin, the consummate establishment fence-sitter, who has made a career of remaining "above" every important battle by passing as a conservative liberal to the liberals and a liberal conservative to the conservatives. It is hardly a surprise, then, that John Gray's latest book is a fawning study of—who else?—Sir Isaiah Berlin: a study, as it were, by an understudy-in-waiting.

Meanwhile, back in the real world, where the cultural left continues its "long march through the institutions," the losses to British cultural life mount up. A good deal of the talk I heard in London in April was devoted to the further "dumbing down" process that is now in progress at the BBC. At BBC radio, for example, the last of the literary programs are under threat of extinction—to be supplanted, I am told, by a still greater emphasis on popular culture. There was a time—and not so long ago, either—when BBC radio could be counted upon to make an important contribution to British intellectual, literary, and artistic life. Its weekly magazine, *The Listener*, was one of the best periodicals of its kind in the English language, and there was hardly a serious writer in Britain who could not earn a few thousand pounds a year from contributing to the broadcasts that were reprinted in that journal. It had its critics, to be sure—most notably, the late F. R. Leavis—and they weren't entirely wrong in their charges of cliquishness and middlebrowism. Yet compared to what is happening now, there is every reason to regard the heyday of BBC radio as a golden age.

Similar changes are overtaking BBC television as well. One of the few intelligent television programs ever to deal with the arts was the BBC's "Late Show," to which —just for the record—I have myself sometimes contributed. The "Late Show," too,



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had its faults—it was too trendy, too closely tethered to glossy reputations and sensational, short-lived events—but at its best it was capable of giving its viewers a cogent and remarkably unsimplified account of an artist's work and the mix of critical opinion it met with. There has certainly never been anything like it on American television.

The last of the "Late Show" productions in which I participated was a documentary film devoted to the late Donald Judd, the American abstract sculptor who in his last years established himself in the small town of Marfa, Texas, where he acquired a large number of properties and became the town's principal employer, though a highly reclusive one. It was Judd's ambition to make Marfa a kind of Bayreuth of Minimalist art, a place to which the international faithful would be expected to make pilgrimages, and he would very likely have succeeded in this bizarre ambition if not for his untimely death last year.

The film which Matthew Collings made of this subject—it is called *Big Art in a One-Horse Town* and was broadcast in February—is one of the most engaging, illuminating, and amusing documentaries ever devoted to an American artist. Its participants include Richard Serra and Dan Flavin and the artist's son, Flavin Judd, but it is the townspeople of Marfa who steal the show with their amazingly shrewd, respectful, and sometimes hilarious assessments of Judd and his work and the ambitions he harbored for it. The result, in my opinion, is a classic. Yet almost the first thing I learned when I arrived in London in April was that the "Late Show," too, had been suspended by the BBC in favor of a new program, designed to be (as I was told) "light, frothy, and campy," devoted to gay life in Britain.

The culture wars in Britain, like those in the U.S., take many forms, of course, and this "dumbing down" of cultural discourse, in which pop culture and sexual politics are given priority over high culture and intellectual distinctions, is only one of them. Another consists of the trashing of history in the name of public education. You might think that a figure such as Winston Churchill would be exempted for this process, but you would be wrong. My visit to London happened to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of V-E Day, and in the midst of the many observances that had been organized to mark that solemn occasion the British public awakened to a remarkable outrage. In an official film designed to inform British school children about the conduct of the war that had saved their country's civilization—there were actually two versions of it: a thirty-minute one for younger children and a full-hour version for older ones—Churchill's role in winning the war was confined to something like seventeen seconds. This caused a bit of an uproar, of course, but mainly among those old enough to have experienced the war. What was really remarkable—and depressing—was that it didn't seem to cause much of a stir with the general public. For the generation that grew up on the Beatles, neither the Second World War nor Churchill's role in it carries any resonance or stirs any emotions—except, perhaps, a feeling of indifference.

In the U.S., of course, we are woefully familiar with the fact that kids can pass through twelve years of schooling without acquiring even a rudimentary knowledge of the history or the geography of the world in which they live—a development that is now so widespread that even teachers of undergraduate students in our universities are no longer able to take it for granted that allusions to the most pivotal events in our history will be understood by adults of voting age deemed sufficiently advanced to qualify for "higher" education. The progress of this kind of cultural illiteracy among the so-called educated classes may still be slower in England than in America, but it is nonetheless well-established on its headlong course.

So is the coarsening of artistic expression and the debasement of the critical—or rather, uncritical—response that accompanies it. An art scene in which a figure like Damien Hirst is elevated to stardom does not differ in any significant respects from the



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one here in America that has made Jeff Koons an emblem of success. It may, if anything, be even further advanced in the direction of an unconscionable nihilism.

When I participated in a debate about contemporary art at the Tate Gallery in 1993, I suggested that despite many claims to the contrary there were no longer any styles or materials that could legitimately be regarded as "transgressive"—the word that has now replaced "avant-garde," which has lost its luster—since everything, no matter how debased, is instantly embraced by the institutions that preside over the fate of contemporary art. The only exception I could think of, I said, was the use of feces as an art material—and in minutes I was contradicted by an earnest young man in the audience who cited a number of contemporary works he admired that had indeed made ample use of such material. Such claims effectively place art—if it can still be called that—beyond the reach of criticism and put it firmly in the realm of social pathology, where in fact a good deal of contemporary art is now to be found on both sides of the Atlantic.

As far as the arts are concerned, the situations in Britain and America are very much alike in another negative respect. In both countries the election of a popular conservative government—Ronald Reagan's in America, Margaret Thatcher's in Britain—not only failed to have a favorable impact on cultural life but, insofar as it played any role in cultural matters, served as an unintended spur to the escalation of precisely those "transgressive" impulses in the arts that have proved to be most destructive to our values. Mrs. Thatcher's reign as prime minister was as impotent in reshaping the agencies of government that lend support to the arts in Britain as Mr. Reagan's presidency was in this country—which is why, among other reasons, the level of outrage at the National Endowment for the Arts was actually accelerated in the 1980s.

Conservatives in government in the 1980s did not really have an arts policy, or any acquaintance with them; until they read about one or another outrage that had been perpetrated by agencies of their own government, they scarcely even knew what was going on in contemporary cultural life. This gave their adversaries on the cultural left an immense advantage, which they exploited with great success. Both the Bush and Major governments proved to be even more inept in this respect, and it remains to be seen whether their conservative successors in the 1990s will be any wiser in dealing with the problems of our adversarial culture. Railing against cultural "elites" is not the solution to this problem. It may, in fact, be a guarantee of failure, for it ought to be a priority for real cultural conservatives to bolster rather than undermine the kind of elite standards that serve to preserve and revitalize the traditions that are now being dismantled by the cultural left in the arts, the universities, and the media. Alas, it may already be too late to reverse the ruinous course that our culture has embarked upon, but that, too, remains to be seen. The only thing we can be absolutely certain of is that conservatives have so far failed to address the issue with the cogency and the vision that it requires, and, as a result of that failure, it is the radical left that remains in charge of our cultural fortunes.



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# What's left of Descartes?

## *by Roger Kimball*

*C'est le privilège du vrai génie, et surtout du génie qui ouvre une carrière, de faire impunément de grandes fautes.*

*It is the privilege of true genius, and above all genius that opens up a new path, to commit great errors with impunity.*
—Voltaire

*Bene vixit, bene qui latuit.*

*He lived well who concealed well.*
—Descartes' motto

One evening many years ago, when I was in graduate school, I somehow found myself in conversation with a group of graduate students who were studying political science. Almost everything about that conversation is now lost in the mists of time, except one detail. The conversation had turned to the nature of modernity. I brought up Descartes, and was probably just about to utter the word "dualism" or "technology" when a vivid young man who (as I recall) tabulated election results interrupted: "I really don't see what someone who lived in the seventeenth century could possibly tell us about the modern world."

The reply, if any, is not recorded. But the incident remained with me as a sort of cautionary tale. Notwithstanding the indifference with which that tabulator of election results regarded the seventeenth century, it is difficult to name an individual whose thinking did more to pave the way for modernity than René Descartes—born though he was in 1596. Everyone knows Descartes' famous formula *Cogito ergo sum*. Almost everybody knows—or supposes he knows—that Descartes espoused a relentlessly dualistic philosophy that made an all-but-impermeable distinction between mind and matter. Of course if this were the whole story, my tabulator would have been right to shrug.

But it is not the whole story. Nor is it simply that Descartes was, as textbooks invariably put it, "the father of modern philosophy": that he was, in the words of a typical encomium, "one of the founders of modern thought and among the most original philosophers and mathematicians of any age." True, without Descartes' contributions to mathematics, it is not clear that our tabulator of election results could have done much with his tabulations. Every time that a student of algebra calculates the square root of $a + b$ or refers to $a^3$ he uses a notation pioneered by Descartes; when someone wishes to plot a curve on a graph, he is likely to do so using the co-ordinate system invented by Descartes and that still bears his name.

But Descartes' influence goes far beyond algebraic notation, analytic geometry, and other mathematical innovations. For better or worse—quite possibly for better *and* worse—the modern world is in a deep sense a Cartesian world. To appreciate the extent of Descartes' continuing presence, one need



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only consider the triumph of scientific rationality and its handmaiden, technology. Descartes did not single-handedly invent these defining features of modernity, the foundations of which belong to an even earlier era. But along with Copernicus, Galileo, Bacon, and others, Descartes was one of the key figures in the formulation of the so-called "New Science" that was destined to replace the contemplative model of science inherited from the Greeks.

To an unprecedented degree, Descartes understood that the citadel of nature could be successfully stormed only by redescribing reality in the language of mathematics—thus purging the visual world of all that was merely visual—and then by testing those descriptions in experiment. In the *Discourse on Method* (1637), justly one of his best-known books, Descartes boasted that his philosophy, in contrast to that taught by the Schools, is fundamentally a "practical philosophy" whose precepts yield "knowledge which is very useful in life." By following his methods, Descartes wrote, we could discover the basic mechanical principles of natural phenomena and then, like skilled craftsmen, intervene and put those principles to work in the world. By so doing, he promised in one of his most striking phrases, we could "render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature." Medicine was only one field in which he expected great strides to be made on the basis of his philosophy.

Looking back from the end of the twentieth century, when technology has transformed the world, it is difficult not to acknowledge the power of Descartes' vision. Perhaps less obvious, however, is that fact that underlying Descartes' "method" was a fateful new attitude toward both the self and the world. As the image of rendering man the master and possessor of nature suggests, physical reality was henceforth to be seen as a homogenous field for human experimentation, manipulation, and reconstruction. We get a clue about Descartes' attitude toward the self in his famous method of systematic doubt: his resolve to "reject as if absolutely false anything as to which I could imagine the least doubt, in order to see if I should not be left at the end believing something that was absolutely indubitable." If traditionally philosophy began in wonder, as Aristotle said, after Descartes it would begin more darkly with doubt. (In this context, it is significant that Descartes hoped to explain extravagant natural phenomena such as meteors and lightning in such a way that "one will no longer have occasion to admire anything about what is seen": for Descartes, wonder was an impediment to knowledge.) Never mind that Descartes himself embraced what he was careful to call "hyperbolic"—i.e., exaggerated—doubt chiefly because it guaranteed (as he thought) an invincible certitude: his heirs found that certitude plenty fragile. And they seized upon the turn inward that such doubt presupposed not as a preliminary to more certain affirmation but as an invitation to explore the newly emancipated self that was thereby revealed.

Thus it was that Descartes' efforts to achieve certainty by withholding assent from everything susceptible to doubt instigated a revolution not just in philosophy but in the whole tenor of intellectual life. There are perhaps few thinkers less "Cartesian" than Marx, Nietzsche, or Freud. Yet even such paradigmatic modern figures continued to move on a map drawn by Descartes, partly in their very opposition to the Cartesian view of man (opposition being a common token of intellectual debt), partly in their determination to subject every accepted opinion to the corrosive scrutiny of doubt.

Whether Descartes, devout Catholic that he was, would have welcomed this development is a good question: almost certainly he would have deplored it. In the *Discourse on Method*, he warns that the "resolution to get rid of all opinions one has so far admitted to belief is in itself not an example for everybody to follow." For one thing, he explains, it is just the sort of thing to tempt those many people "who think they are more clever than they are, and cannot help forming precipitate judgments." Jacques Derrida, where are you?



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Given the extent of Descartes' influence, it is perhaps not surprising that his legacy should be fraught with ironies, misunderstandings, and various intellectual perversities. As Stephen Gaukroger notes in his ambitious new biography of Descartes,[1] "more than any other modern philosopher, he has been fashioned according to the philosophies of the time and interpreted accordingly." Mr. Gaukroger, who teaches philosophy at the University of Sydney, proposes to extract the "real" Descartes from the integument spun by his multifarious interpreters; whether what we actually get is an unemcumbered Descartes, or only one bedecked with Mr. Gaukroger's preoccupations, is an open question. His reference early on to "Simone de Beauvoir's incomparable intellectual autobiography" will hearten or dismay readers according to their feelings about this onetime idol of *gauchiste* feminism. His evident fondness for psychoanalytic interpretations occasionally insinuates a slight psychologizing haze into the biographical portions of the book, though this rarely becomes downright disfiguring. Mr. Gaukroger several times refers, somewhat anachronistically, to occasions when Descartes may have suffered a "nervous breakdown"; he makes much of the facts that Descartes' mother died a little more than a year after he was born and that his father was distant and cold. (Actually, he seems to have been distinctly hostile. When Descartes published the *Discourse on Method* in 1637, his father is reported to have remarked: "Only one of my children has displeased me. How can I have engendered a son stupid enough to have had himself bound in calf?")

In any event, the real meat of this book lies elsewhere. It is often said that with Descartes philosophy abandoned or at least discounted metaphysics for the sake of epistemology. The prime exhibits for this contention are the *Discourse on Method* and the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), works that set forth Descartes' experiments in systematic doubt and that put the question of justifying knowledge center stage. These are the books by Descartes that every beginner in philosophy is invited to ponder and that most philosophers have made the center of their interest in Descartes. As it happens, the most engaging pages of Mr. Gaukroger's book are those dealing with these two books. But he also spends a great deal of time explicating Descartes' more strictly scientific and mathematical works. This makes some parts of the book quite technical and even—since much of Descartes' science is chiefly of historical interest—a tad antiquarian. Mr. Gaukroger's mastery of this material is impressive. But I think it fair to say that most readers, asked if they were interested in long, detailed discussions of Descartes' theory of vortices or the function of the pineal gland, would respond as did Salter in Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop*: "Up to a point, Lord Copper."

Mr. Gaukroger's focus on Descartes' scientific works is part and parcel of his mildly "revisionist" view of the philosopher's accomplishments. Mr. Gaukroger, who duly acknowledges three grants from the Australian Research Council, informs readers that "it is not the Descartes from whom philosophers have made such a good living for decades that they will find here." Well, yes and no. There are not really that many surprises in this book, though Mr. Gaukroger does emphasize elements of Descartes' work that generally get shorter shrift. In his view, Descartes was first of all committed to making advances in natural science, not to immunizing philosophy against the virus of skepticism. Among the most explicit items he advances to support his case is the note that Descartes wrote toward the end of his life to one of his admirers:

> You should not devote so much attention to the *Meditations* and to metaphysical questions. . . . They draw the mind too far away from physical and observable things, and unfits it to study them. Yet it is precisely physical studies that it is most desirable for men to pursue.

1 *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography*, by Stephen Gaukroger; Oxford University Press, 500 pages, $35.



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Accordingly, perhaps the chief intellectual interest of this book is Mr. Gaukroger's effort to rescue Descartes from the philosophers and set his work in the context of seventeenth-century scientific speculation, especially the daring—but heterodox—cosmological theories of Copernicus.

Like all biographers of Descartes, Mr. Gaukroger is constrained to depend rather heavily on Adrien Baillet's life of the philosopher that appeared in 1691. Although obviously "out of date," Baillet's book is still the only source we have for certain quotations and anecdotes about Descartes, parts of whose life are rather sketchily documented. For example, I believe that Baillet is the only contemporary source for the story that Descartes fought a duel over a lady in 1628; likewise, it is from Baillet that we learn that Descartes said, apparently around the same time, that he had never found a woman whose beauty was comparable with that of truth. In the biographical parts of his book—which probably amount to no more than a tenth of his text—Mr. Gaukroger is also indebted to the very readable biography of Descartes by Jack R. Vrooman that appeared in 1970. He leaves earlier useful but somewhat pious efforts such as Elizabeth S. Haldane's *Descartes: His Life and Times* (1905) entirely out of account.

Descartes was born in La Haye, a small town in Tours that is now called "Descartes." The third of three surviving children, he was precocious but sickly. His father, Joachim, was a councillor of the Parlement of Brittany and a man of moderate landed property. After Descartes' mother died, he and his siblings were sent to live with their maternal grandmother. Joachim remarried and in due course fathered an additional four children. In 1606, when he was ten, Descartes was sent to the new Jesuit *collège* of La Flèche in Anjou, where he spent the next eight years absorbing the classical curriculum as set forth in the *Ratio Studiorum*, the comprehensive prescriptions for study and behavior followed by all Jesuit colleges. Sometime in 1615, he went to study law at the University of Poitiers, where he took his baccalaureate and license in civil and canon law in 1616.

When he was in his early twenties, Descartes seems to have contemplated a military career and over the next decade or so was attached to several armies. He enlisted in the Dutch army as a gentleman soldier under Prince Maurice of Nassau in 1618. Later that year, he met and collaborated with Isaac Beeckman, a scientist and mathematician who, eight years Descartes' senior, acted as a kind of mentor and rekindled Descartes' interest in science. Descartes presented his first work, *Compendium Musicae*, as a gift to Beeckman on New Year's Day 1619. (Beeckman was an interesting figure: among other things he set up the first meteorological station in Europe in 1628.) In 1619, as the Thirty Years War was beginning, Descartes left Maurice and enlisted in the Bavarian army.

It was while he was stationed in Ulm, Germany, on November 10, 1619, that Descartes had the famous series of three dreams (or nightmares) that, he believed, revealed to him the "*mirabilis scientiae fundamenta*," the foundations of a marvelous knowledge. According to the French Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain, these dreams (the details of which we know about from Baillet) contained "in embryo the whole of cartesian rationalism." For his part, Mr. Gaukroger is "very pessimistic" about what can be achieved by interpreting the dreams. Noting how "stylized" and literary they are (in one part of the dream, Descartes recalls seeing a fragment from an ode by Ausonius: "*Quod vitae sectabor iter?*"—"What road of life shall I follow?"), Mr. Gaukroger concludes that "it is quite possible that Descartes was suffering a nervous breakdown, almost certainly not his first." Be that as it may, Descartes regarded the dreams as "the most important thing in my life" and vowed to make a pilgrimage of thanksgiving to Our Lady of Loretto, a vow he apparently fulfilled five years later.

Descartes' movements in the early 1620s are not well known. In 1623, he visited Italy, and he was settled in Paris in 1625–26. He



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sold the property left to him by his mother, losing the title "Seigneur du Perron" but gaining a modest regular income. During this time he met Marin Mersenne, one of his most important correspondents, worked intensively on geometrical problems, and began working on the book (which was left unfinished) that became the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (posthumously published in 1701). Around 1626, he discovered the law of refraction, which explains the behavior of light rays as they pass from one medium to another. In 1628, at a meeting on Aristotelean philosophy at the residence of the papal nuncio, Descartes had a famous public confrontation with a certain doctor Chandoux, a chemist/alchemist who argued against the dominance of scholastic philosophy and in favor of a science based on merely probable knowledge. His training in rhetoric standing him in good stead, Descartes gave a dazzling public refutation, arguing that only absolute certainty could serve as a basis for knowledge. (It is a nice detail that Chandoux was later executed for counterfeiting.) Cardinal Bérulle, an important figure in Parisian intellectual and political circles, was in the audience and encouraged Descartes to develop his insights into a comprehensive system.

In 1628, Descartes joined the army that was besieging the Huguenot stronghold at La Rochelle. This was to be his last association with the military. In 1629, Descartes retired to Holland, where he remained, with brief interruptions, until 1649. In part, Descartes went to the Netherlands in search of greater seclusion; he was an intensely private, indeed secretive, man, and he moved often to avoid the importunities of friends and admirers. The 1630s found him in Amsterdam, Deventer, Leiden, Utrecht, Haarlem, Endergeest, and the Hague. The Netherlands were attractive also as an oasis of (relative) liberty and freedom. As Bertrand Russell noted in his history of philosophy, "it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of Holland in the seventeenth century, as the one country where there was freedom of speculation. Hobbes had to have his books printed there; Locke took refuge there during the five worst years of reaction in England before 1688; Bayle (of the *Dictionary*) found it necessary to live there; and Spinoza would hardly have been allowed to do his work in any other country."

Among other activities, Descartes avidly pursued his anatomical researches during these years, acquiring animal parts from local butchers for dissection. In 1635, while he was staying with a friend in Amsterdam, he fathered a child with a maid named Hélène. According to Jack Vrooman, this was "the only relationship in [Descartes'] life where by his own admission the sexual act played a significant role." Although he referred to the child, Francine, as his "niece," he seems to have been genuinely fond of her and to have provided for her and her mother. When the child died of a fever in 1640, he is said to have remarked that it was the greatest sorrow of his life.

Beginning in 1639, the Netherlands became distinctly less hospitable. Descartes became the target of abuse from one Gisbert Voetius, a professor of theology at the University of Utrecht, who, as Mr. Gaukroger observes, "set out to destroy Descartes" in a campaign of insinuation and slander that was to last for more than five years. At one point, Descartes was in danger of being expelled from the city and having his books burned. So it is not perhaps surprising that when Queen Christina of Sweden invited Descartes to come to Stockholm under her protection he (after some hesitation) decided to accept. Descartes arrived in Sweden in October of 1649. At first, he had almost no duties. But in January—the most bitterly cold in many years—he began tutoring the Queen, whom Bertrand Russell aptly describes as "a passionate and learned lady who thought that, as a sovereign, she had the right to waste the time of great men." The tutorials commenced at 5:00 A.M. three days a week and lasted for some five hours. For Descartes, who was accustomed to sleep late and preferred working in bed, the regime was too much. After nursing a sick friend to



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health, he himself came down with pneumonia and died in February 1650.

The Descartes who emerges here is a somewhat knottier figure than the serene rationalist we know from Philosophy 101. The knots are of several varieties. Descartes tried desperately to stay out of theological controversy and craved the *imprimatur* of Church authority. When Galileo's work was condemned in 1633 for teaching the Copernican system, Descartes promptly suppressed his book *Le Monde*, which also depended on Copernicus: "if it is false," Descartes wrote in dismay to Mersenne, "so too are the entire foundations of my philosophy." Many have criticized his action as timorous, which perhaps it was; but it was also a witness to Descartes' humility about theological issues: "I wouldn't," he wrote to Mersenne, "want to publish a discourse which had a single word that the Church disapproved." Alas, theological controversy dogged him—not, it must be said, without reason—though his works were not placed on the Index until 1663.

If Descartes exhibited a remarkable reticence when it came to theological matters, he was not in other respects notable for his humility. In 1629, believing that Isaac Beeckman claimed credit for some of his theories about music, Descartes fired off a long, vituperative letter in which he broke off relations with his friend and former mentor, demanding that he return the *Compendium Musicae* and remarking (among much else) that he had learned as much from Beeckman as he had learned "from ants and worms." As Mr. Gaukroger notes, "it is just not possible to take Descartes' side in this dispute." Descartes wildly over-reacted to an innocent statement by Beeckman and, besides, there can be no doubt that Descartes *was* intellectually indebted to his early collaborator. Descartes was a philosophical and mathematical genius of the first water; but he shared with lesser men some unfortunate qualities, including a tendency to intellectual vanity that made it difficult for him to acknowledge the achievements of others. In a letter to Mersenne, he referred to the great mathematician Pierre de Fermat as "dung"; others who had criticized his work on geometry were dismissed as "two or three flies"; Thomas Hobbes was "extremely contemptible"; the letters of the mathematician Jean Beaugrand were only fit to be used as toilet paper; etc.

Mr. Gaukroger remarks dryly that "the simple fact is that Descartes did not like criticism." Obviously this is an understatement. What is remarkable, though, is the image we have of Descartes as a serene and diligent inquirer who cared for the truth above everything. The fact that he first published his greatest work, the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, complete with a set of objections by such eminences as Hobbes, Mersenne, Antoine Arnauld, and Pierre Gassendi, only reinforces this image. If the reality was at variance with the image it is partly because Descartes cultivated his image so assiduously. In an often-quoted passage from the *Cogitationes Privatae* ("Private Thoughts"), a collection of fragments written around 1619 and known to us from a copy made by Leibniz, Descartes writes that "just as comedians are counselled not to let shame appear on their foreheads, and so put on a mask (*personam induunt*): so likewise, now that I am about to mount the stage of the world, where I have so far been a spectator, I come forward in a mask (*larvatus prodeo*)." Many writers, above all Jacques Maritain, have made a great deal of this passage. It does not seem to have impressed Mr. Gaukroger particularly (he nowhere mentions Maritain). But it is I think at least curious that Descartes, the proverbial champion of clear and distinct ideas, should have set forth on his career with an admission of deliberate—what? Duplicity? Subterfuge? Artifice? And it is even more striking that he should have chosen the word *larvatus*, which can mean "masked," but which also means "bewitched." (*Persona* is the common Latin word for "mask.")

Descartes told one correspondent that his motto was *Bene vixit, bene qui latuit*: a tag from Ovid that can mean "He lived well



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who concealed well" or "He lived well who was private and unobtrusive." The more we know about Descartes, the more both renderings seem appropriate. In this context, it is worth saying a word or two about Descartes' prose, certainly one of his most impressive artifacts. Quite apart from the substance of his work, one of Descartes' chief attractions has always been his style. Especially in his more strictly philosophical books—above all the *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy*—Descartes wrote with beguiling simplicity. The simplicity is beguiling because it is at least in part only the *appearance* of simplicity. Together with Plato, Hume, Schopenhauer, and (a more florid example) Nietzsche, Descartes is one of the great philosophical stylists of all time. His celebrated embrace of the "clear and distinct" as criteria for truth (or at least immunity from doubt) has a corollary in the elegantly supple lucidity of his prose. When first reading Descartes, one has the sensation of utter clarity and comprehension. It is only when looking back and re-reading that doubts and difficulties, like Descartes' "evil genius" in the *Meditations*, begin to undermine one's confidence.

At the beginning of his book, Mr. Gaukroger writes that "it is easily forgotten just how controversial, reviled, and celebrated a figure Descartes was, not just in his own lifetime, but for the next 150 years or so." In fact, the revilement continues even today. The great peculiarity is that although we inhabit a world that is inconceivable without the influence of Descartes, no philosopher is more regularly abused and excoriated. For many, the term "Cartesian" is these days little more than a handy negative epithet, an all-purpose term of abuse suggesting by turns sterile rationalism, a predatory attitude toward nature, and even nasty capitalist habits of acquisitiveness. Thus it is that one trendy academic historian warns in his latest work of "cultural studies" against "the Cartesian ethos of consumer culture," the "commodity fetishism [that] . . . underwrote a Cartesian vision of an isolated self in an inert world of objects," etc. It would be exceedingly polite, though not entirely inaccurate, to describe such uses of "Cartesian" as spasms of late Romantic irrationalism: more or less feeble protests against a world that seems unaccountably indifferent to our desires.

Not that there isn't a great deal to criticize in Descartes. Philosophers from Pascal (who in his *Pensées* dismissed Descartes as "*inutile et incertain*") to Wittgenstein and beyond have found themselves vexed by what Descartes had to say about God, knowledge, the self, the physical world, and other matters. The number of "definitive" arguments mounted against dualism, the cogito, and the ideal of clear and distinct ideas has been legion. Descartes remains: one of those intellectual giants who seem endlessly vulnerable but who are somehow nonetheless ever unavoidable.

The point is that the ambivalence we feel about Descartes is a reflection of the ambivalence we feel about modernity. Despite the prattlings of contemporary academic "humanists," New Agers, and other intellectually handicapped persons, no one can in good faith utter a simple "no" to modernity. And yet an unqualified "yes" is also impossible. Descartes' dream of a philosophy that would render man the "master and possessor of nature" has been all but realized. The question is whether we can really *inhabit* the world that we rule over with such thoroughness. Paul Valéry summed up the problem in his brief sketch for an essay on Descartes. Like many moderns, Valéry found himself bewitched by the heroic solipsism of Descartes' formula, *cogito ergo sum*. Yet he knew that a corollary of that formula was a world in which "the word 'Knowledge' is increasingly denied to anything which cannot be translated into figures." Among other things, this meant that "the truth for modern man, which is exactly related to his freedom of action over nature, seems more and more to be in opposition to everything that our imagination and our feelings would like to be true." What's left of Descartes? A very great deal. Which is the glory and the frightening challenge of modernity.



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# The "Pictographs" of Adolph Gottlieb

*by Karen Wilkin*

In the freeze-dried version of the history of American art, the kind familiar from survey courses and gallery tours, each artist of the New York School is identified with a single signature image: Pollock with an all-over tangle of poured paint, Rothko with stacked blocks of color, Kline with overscaled black-and-white brushstrokes, Newman with the "Zip"—a single narrow line—and so on. The name of Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974) is synonymous with the "Burst"—a large, haloed disc hovering above an exuberant tangle of vigorous strokes. The equation is so neat that even among Gottlieb's admirers, who should know better, Burst paintings are assumed to represent the artist best; I remember one serious collector telling me, moreover, that only the black, white, and red Bursts were worth considering.

But when Gottlieb made the first of the Burst pictures, in 1957, he was fifty-four and had been painting seriously since the late 1920s—more than half his life, at the time. Before he was out of his thirties, he had established himself as a highly accomplished, adventurous figurative painter with a ten-year history of regular exhibitions in New York, a respectable body of work behind him, and a couple of prizes to his credit. His circle of artist-friends included Ilya Bolotowsky, Mark Rothko, Milton Avery, David Smith, Dorothy Dehner, Edgar Levy, and the charismatic catalyst of the New York art world of the day, John Graham. Gottlieb could boast, too, of a remarkable formation for an American painter of his generation—even, in those days, for a native New Yorker. He had left high school to study with John Sloan and Robert Henri at the Art Students League, and a year later worked his passage to Europe to spend the next two years in Paris, haunting the museums, attending sketch classes at a number of studio schools, and making occasional forays to other centers, including Munich and Berlin. On his return to New York in 1923, the twenty-year-old Gottlieb completed high school and then extended his formal art education with studies at Parsons, Cooper Union, and the Educational Alliance, as well as at the League. An additional two months in Europe, in 1935, further enriched his firsthand knowledge of both Old Master and current art, and he began to collect African sculpture—a lifelong passion, along with Northwest Coast tribal art. And from 1937 to 1939, Gottlieb and his wife, Esther Dick, lived in the desert, near Tucson, apparently a period of near-isolation and intensive work, of experiment and reflection.

Gottlieb's surviving early paintings—those from before 1940—bear witness to his wide-ranging early experience of what used to be called, without ironic quotation marks, advanced art. They range from rather dark, broadly handled figure paintings in the Sloan–Henri mode to firmly structured still lifes and views of New York that demonstrate their author's familiarity with Cézanne; from moody figure paintings and



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park scenes informed by German Expressionism and possibly by Marsden Hartley to stylized portraits, city scenes, still lifes, and circuses, clearly related to the contemporary work of Avery and Rothko but also deeply indebted to Matisse, Picasso, and, once again, Cézanne. Gottlieb's works from these early years hold our interest chiefly for what they reveal about his taste and ambition during a formative period, yet his gifts as a colorist and his sensitivity to the material properties of paint are already visible, and in the best pictures there's a brooding intensity, an emotional charge that can be seen as a prefiguration of the painter's later incarnation as an Abstract Expressionist. For even the most sympathetic viewer, though, Gottlieb's works prior to 1940 are most notable for their youthfulness; they are best categorized as the efforts of an abundantly talented but not fully formed artist whose real personality was yet to emerge in his pictures.

Yet over the next decade or so, from 1941 to about 1953, this young artist unequivocally declared his maturity and his individuality in a seminal group of inventive canvases and works on paper known as "Pictographs." The series is the subject of a long-overdue exhibition seen earlier at the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., and currently at the Brooklyn Museum.[1] Gottlieb produced approximately three hundred Pictographs, but only two museum exhibitions have previously been devoted to this pivotal body of work: the first, in 1968, was the Guggenheim's part of a large Gottlieb retrospective, jointly organized with the Whitney and installed simultaneously in both museums; the second, of which I was the curator, toured Canadian museums in 1977 and '78. The selection of works in the present exhibition, drawn from the collection of the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, from key museums, and from a surprisingly small number of private collectors, allows us to follow the evolution of the Pictographs from the inception of the series in 1941, through various permutations, to the eventual near-dissolution of the format in the latest works of the group—which are also among the most remarkable. From first to last, they are quirky, edgy, often very beautiful pictures: spontaneous-seeming, almost casual arrangements of richly associative, but non-specific, invented glyphs and signs, ordered by schematic grids. At first, the cryptic images, tenuously related to one another on an unstable, irregular scaffolding of painted lines, seem the most important aspects of the pictures, but we quickly realize that color and surface are also significant—perhaps most significant—in establishing the works' emotional temperature and expressive character.

Individually, the best of the Pictographs are compelling, seductive pictures that require no further justification other than their own excellences, but as a group, they also help us to read Gottlieb's subsequent work. The suggestive imagery of the Pictographs provides clues to the layers of meaning and the dense, ambiguous allusions implied by the Bursts and their descendants. Equally important, the Pictographs offer us graphic, concrete evidence of some of the main preoccupations of New York's small community of truly daring painters during the childhood years of the New York avant-garde, when this handful of young men—and a few young women—strove to establish their own identities as painters and sculptors and, along the way, established a new level of ambition and audacity for American art.

1 "The Pictographs of Adolph Gottlieb" opened at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, on April 21, 1995, and remains on view through August 26. It was previously seen at the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. (September 24, 1994–January 2, 1995), and the Portland Museum of Art, Maine (February 4–April 2, 1995); it will conclude its travels at the Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock (November 30, 1995–January 28, 1996). A catalogue, edited by Sanford Hirsch, has been published by the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation and Hudson Hills Press (144 pages, $45; $25 paper).



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The Pictographs are ambitious, brave pictures, brave because at the time of their inception, New York, apart from the Gottliebs' small circle, was not particularly sympathetic to innovative, French-influenced painting. "Official" American art was not modernist, nor did it look toward Europe. Gottlieb and his colleagues allied themselves with the modern movement—which meant vanguard Europe—yet while they found synthetic Cubism, especially Picasso, to be a potent formal model and found Surrealist ideas of plumbing the unconscious for subject matter to be intriguing, they had no wish to follow European directions slavishly. At the same time, however, they rejected the approved American establishment art of the period—the self-conscious regionalism of the Thomas Hart Benton type, which Gottlieb characterized bitterly as the "Corn Belt Academy"—and despite their generally progressive politics, they rejected, too, the engagé social realism that was the urban, leftist equivalent of Benton's scenes of idealized rural life. Gottlieb described the period in a 1967 symposium organized by *Art News*:

> During the 1940s, a few painters were painting with a feeling of absolute desperation . . . The situation was so bad that I know I felt free to try anything, no matter how absurd it seemed; what was there to lose? Neither Cubism nor Surrealism could absorb someone like myself: we felt like derelicts. The American establishment was obviously lacking in seriousness. There seemed to be an enormous vacuum that needed to be filled; but with what?

The "what," for Gottlieb, at least, turned out to be a synthesis of Cubist structure in the form of an organizing grid, of archaicism and "primitivism" in the form of imagery that recalled both ancient glyphs and the art of Africa and the Pacific, along with Surrealist theory and an admixture of Freudian and Jungian thought in the form of trusting to chance and the unwilled, of "tapping the subconscious" (in a frequent phrase of the day). The recurring assumption, among artists otherwise as disparate as Gottlieb, Pollock, and the Uruguayan modernist Joáquin Torres-García, was that since the unconscious was a vast repository of shared racial and cultural memory, images released through the use of what the Surrealists called "pure psychic automatism"—a kind of sophisticated doodling—would be charged with universal meaning. Gottlieb's Pictographs can be read as paradigmatic examples of this attitude, if we assume that the glyphs are signs for deep-rooted, ancient conditions of the psyche—emblems, that is to say, of the collective unconscious. It's worth noting, however, that though Gottlieb's circle regarded the unconscious as the source of creativity and believed in the universality of the patterns of human relationships symbolized by myths, Gottlieb himself was wary of attaching concrete significance to his invented "symbols," much as he wanted them to resonate and provoke associations. He maintained, in fact, that once he figured out what a glyph meant to him, he was unable to use that image again.

When he was interviewed in 1968, Gottlieb recalled the genesis of the series:

> [It] started with some conversations that I had with Rothko . . . Everyone was painting the American scene—Mark was painting people in subway stations . . . I said, well, why not try to find a good subject matter like mythological themes . . . I played around with the Oedipus myth which was both a classical theme and a Freudian theme . . . We very quickly discovered that by a shift in subject matter we were getting into formal problems that we hadn't anticipated. Because obviously we weren't going to try to illustrate these themes in some sort of Renaissance style. We were exploring. So we suddenly found that there were formal problems that confronted us for which there was no precedent. We were in unknown territory.

The first of the Pictographs, painted in 1941—the earliest works in the show—are among the most literal, but they already declare formal and conceptual motifs that



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remain constant in the series. Oedipus is represented by eyes, both wide open and opaquely blind, stylized hands, crowned profiles, and fragmented features, all detached and isolated in various "compartments" of the loosely brushed irregular grid. While these images never again appear as explicitly, they offer hints about possible, partial readings of more abstracted, economical glyphs in later works. Ovals and fringed circles, for example, while undeniably sexual in association, can remind us of the eyes of Oedipus—and according to the exhibition's catalogue, the eyes of the artist and, by extension, his function as beholder and witness—while snake-like squiggles, at once generic, phallic, and creepy, can suddenly remind us of the outlined fingers of the earliest images; in the same way, an elongated triangle and a "T" configuration, which can suggest schematic torsos, among many other things, reveal their connection with early, schematic glyphs that conjoin brows, eyes, and a narrow outlined nose. And so on. There is no single interpretation of any of the glyphs, however legible it may seem. (Gottlieb was adamant in rejecting any specific reading of his images as "rebuses.") The scale of the body parts and our relation to them shifts from section to section, which further defeats particular interpretation and prevents the pictures from reading as surfaces with glyphs imposed on them, despite Gottlieb's invocation of ancient writing tablets in his titles. But he was, after all, a sophisticated twentieth-century painter, well versed in the language of Cubism, so it's not surprising that these enigmatic "writings" pulse slightly. This mobility of scale persists throughout the series, allowing some images to flicker between close-up and distant view and permitting others, in adjacent compartments, to join momentarily into new larger configurations, adding tension and a measure of mystery to the pictures. The pull between the divisions of the grids and the expanse of Gottlieb's subtly inflected monochrome surfaces simply heightens this tension.

Fundamental uniformity of format notwithstanding, the Pictorgraphs are impressive in their range and variety. Clearly, the loose grid was simply a way of generating a picture, of canceling out the insistent purity of the untouched canvas, and, initially, of organizing a series of intuitively arrived at, almost "automatic" images. As we become more involved with individual pictures in the series, we realize that the organizing grid is rarely drawn on the surface, but more frequently exists as "escapes" of layers of previous colors. In the last of the series, the grid dissolves, but persists as a memory, with the glyphs held tensely in precise order, as though caught in an invisible magnetic field; in one late, odd-ball picture, notable for its restrained palette, the grid is literally constructed with slats of wood and projects from the surface of the canvas.

The glyphs themselves, sometimes broad and brushy, sometimes crisp and linear, sometimes fluid and calligraphic, sometimes dense and opaque, can be buried in layers of pigment or, especially in the later Pictographs, can break free of the confining grid and drift independently to the edges of the canvas. In two of the most resonant pictures in the show, *Sounds at Night* (1948, Gottlieb Foundation) and *Archer* (1951, Private Collection, San Francisco), the grid has virtually disappeared. The glyphs verge on becoming incidents of painting rather than "signs," although the contrast between delicate, linear drawing and broadly painted shapes, present in many of the Pictographs but a key element in the drama of these late works, points to the expressive confrontation of disc and tangle in the Bursts. (There is, however, another fine series of works in between: the "Imaginary Landscapes.") In *Sounds at Night*, a brooding gray, ochre, and brushy white picture, layers of shapes and lines seem to emerge slowly from a suffocating atmosphere of pigment, their transparency and their alignment on the surface—perhaps *in* the surface—an echo at once of the rational organization of the grid and the fluctuation of Cubist planes. In *Archer*, built out of near-primaries trapped against a diaphanous pale blue expanse, a fragment of



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grid has captured some of the floating glyphs to form a momentary heroic "figure." Miró and late Klee are present in these paintings, which takes nothing away from their strength or originality; it's simply evidence of their lineage and of Gottlieb's ambition.

In the end, however, it is color that counts most in the Pictographs. How could anyone think the black, white, and red Bursts are the ones to reckon with when Gottlieb, at his best, was such an inspired orchestrator of subtle, unidentifiable hues? The selection of works in the exhibition makes plain the range of his abilities. There are pictures that make improbable harmonies of murky violets and dull ochres, or manage to subvert the inherent lyricism of chalky off-whites, pale rose, celestial blues, and saffron yellow. Each of the Pictographs has its own dominant color, even the apparently monochrome, brown-rose-gray pictures from the first years of the series, the ones that seem most deliberately to invoke stone tablets and weathered rock-faces. These dominant hues, however, are the result of layering, overpainting, and, sometimes, scraping out, so that the surfaces are dense, almost tactile, and the expanses of color are subtly inflected and intensely evocative of the history of the picture itself, of the complexities of process. Incised drawing, cancellation, and re-excavation of images enhance these vivid reminders of the act of painting.

There's a great deal that can be said about these pictures, including much about their roots in sources as diverse as Mondrian and a Chilkat/Tlingit blanket that Gottlieb owned for many years, and the handsome catalogue that accompanies the show attempts to address all of it, including the now-delicate issue of Gottlieb's relationship to the non-Western art he admired, collected, and drew upon, directly and indirectly, for inspiration. The difficulty, of course, is that while responsiveness to non-Western sources is to be applauded these days, Gottlieb, who was, of course, male, white, heterosexual, and of European stock, was notably uninterested in the cultural meaning and the context that produced the African works he loved and lived with—to the exclusion of any other works of art, other than his own and that Chilkat blanket, with its densely packed rows of outlined black "icons." At the Brooklyn Museum, which houses Esther and Adolph Gottlieb's collection of African and Northwest Coast art, pieces from that collection have been installed as a coda to the Pictograph show, while the exhibition as a whole is hung in rooms adjacent to the museum's superb and beautifully—newly—installed holdings of African, Oceanic, and North American aboriginal art. The proximity is somewhat fortuitous, but it provides an excellent opportunity for direct comparisons, allowing viewers to evaluate for themselves the connection between the paintings and their non-Western sources.

As to the connection between the paintings and their Western "high art" sources, the catalogue essays are thorough and informative. Most of them, by various authors including Charlotta Kotik and Linda Kohnheim Kramer, curators at the Brooklyn Museum, Sanford Hirsch, executive director of the Gottlieb Foundation, and Lawrence Alloway (reprinted from a 1968 publication), are quite straightforward. There's nothing here that seems really new, but it's useful to have it all between two covers. Most of the reproductions, alas, do justice neither to Gottlieb's color nor to the richness of the pictures' material qualities, although the works on paper come off pretty well, perhaps because they are less densely layered and, being smaller, have been altered less by reproduction. Since the exhibition includes some remarkably fine paper works, ranging from spare, pared-down studies to fully bodied paintings on paper, this considerably improves the quality of the catalogue.

I'm obviously not an impartial observer, but I've always been puzzled by the fact that Gottlieb figures less prominently in the public consciousness than do many of his colleagues—less so than Pollock or de



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Kooning, which is, I suppose, understandable, but also, inexplicably, less so than Barnett Newman, or Clyfford Still, or his friend Mark Rothko. It may have something to do with Newman's and Still's rhetoric as opposed to Gottlieb's relative reticence, or, as has been suggested, with the heroic size of Newman and Still's pictures as opposed to the relative modesty of Gottlieb's. I suspect it has, as well, something to do with the tabloid drama of Rothko's history—the estrangements and reconciliations, the suicide, the posthumous lawsuits, and all the rest of it—in marked contrast to the general uneventfulness of Gottlieb's life. If it had anything to do with achievement as a painter, especially in those early, pivotal years of the New York School, Gottlieb would loom very large indeed. Just compare the best of the incisive, moody, enigmatic Pictographs with Rothko's first, rather tentative, sweet forays into abstraction. (Given Newman's and Still's notorious creativity in dating—and re-dating—their "early" pictures, it's difficult to enlarge on this idea.) Perhaps the large, well-chosen show at the Brooklyn Museum, "The Pictographs of Adolph Gottlieb," will help set things right.



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# The other other Frost

## *by William Logan*

There have always been good reasons to ignore Robert Frost. The most traditional, the most metrically and morally conservative of modern poets, he was in a strict sense the last American poet of the nineteenth century (twelve at the death of Dickinson, he entered Dartmouth the year Whitman died). He could be hidebound and narrow and backward-looking, his Yankee landscape the agrarian fantasy of a Southern Democrat—not John Crowe Ransom or Allen Tate, but Andrew Jackson. The land he celebrated (not just the physical landscape but the moral landscape) was already gone, if it had ever existed. No American poet has created a more profound pastoral than Frost—profound because we'd like to believe it was a real place, not just the landscape of poetry.

Part of Frost's despair was his knowledge that his world was gone (when the terms of Frost's world were gone, the people remained). Many of his best poems take loss as their theme—sometimes as private and as crippling as anything in American literature. He was a ruined melancholic, and the dark gestures of his late Romanticism make him a moodier and far more difficult figure than Stevens, or Eliot, or Pound—compared to Frost they are shining untroubled aesthetes. They took America as a hypothesis; he took it for what it was—Frost told the stories that Whitman only suggested.

Frost was a poet of missed chance, of failed opportunity, of regret and cold disappointment. Of all the moderns he is the one we have not come to terms with, yet part of the problem has always been Frost himself. He did so much to emphasize, to publicize and receive honorary Ph.D.'s for, his own worst instincts, to make himself the cracker-barrel Yankee sage people were glad to take him for, a kind of Grandma Moses on the deck of the *Pequod*, that we shouldn't be surprised if now it is almost impossible to take him for anything else. More than forty years ago Randall Jarrell wrote two marvelous essays of rehabilitation, "The Other Frost" and "To the Laodiceans," arguing for the gloomy, hard, human Frost ("human" was a favorite Jarrell word), the Frost of "The Witch of Coös," "Provide, Provide," and "Home Burial." Most of the poems Jarrell favored are now part of our Frost—but instead we have two Frosts, a farmer schizophrenic, half Vermont maple-syrup and half raw granite, an old man of the mountains people can take home to dinner.

Each of these Frosts serves the idiom of our beliefs—we need the one to believe that poetry is good, the other to believe that poetry is true. Each version is a fact, but each is also a bias confirmed by the partiality of a reading. Frost was at times a bad philosopher, a man who wore his morals on his sleeve, and as he grew older he convinced himself he was a *philosophe* of masques and fables—he almost became a fable himself (or an apophthegm dreaming it was a fable). For sententious observation, homespun morals, complacent sentiment, and barn-idle



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philosophizing (the kind a cat does, tangled in a ball of yarn), you can't go much further than the later Frost. By the time John F. Kennedy asked him to read at the 1961 Inaugural, Frost was more a monument than half the equestrian statues in Washington —a brass-necked cold calculation, standing proudly on all fours. Has any major poet written a worse poem about America than "The Gift Outright"? It contains every part of Frost's terrible sentiment for the Land, America, the Past, for Ourselves, for the general myth that replaces the mangled event—even the best line, "To the land vaguely realizing westward," drowns in the horror of all that is left unsaid.

When "Home Burial" and "The Death of the Hired Man" can sit comfortably in high-school anthologies, no longer cruel rural dramas but complacent period pieces, perhaps it is time for a different Frost, one not so easily lost to high-mindedness. There is need for a Frost less dramatic and more demonic, a Frost of impermanent mood, whose own moods seemed a confusion to him (hence his reliance on, his attraction to, codes of behavior, morals, blind jurisprudence, the otherworldly forces that might set the world in order, or strip it to raw design).

Jarrell wanted people to read Frost, to suffer from his range and his terrors, and what is permanent in Frost now includes many of the poems Jarrell salvaged from neglect: "The Witch of Coös," "Neither out Far Nor in Deep," "Home Burial," "Acquainted with the Night," "Design," "Provide, Provide," "An Old Man's Winter Night," and "Desert Places." (Even "After Apple-Picking" and "The Gift Outright," poems I can't imagine anyone liking. I may as well admit that my taste is different from Jarrell's—I don't like "Directive," I don't think "Provide, Provide" an "immortal masterpiece," though I like it well enough, and I despise "The Gift Outright." Every reader should have a list of the Frost poems he can't abide.)

If Jarrell's Frost was the Frost of interior and melancholy, of moral observation and metallic cunning, he was also the Frost whose monologues and scenes tended toward sentiment (a poet a lot like himself, in other words). I would like to propose what might seem impossible after Jarrell, a list of a dozen or so of Frost's best poems rarely seen in anthologies and likely to be new to most readers. Here is the list: "The Code," "A Hundred Collars," "The Bearer of Evil Tidings," "Snow," "Place for a Third," "The Exposed Nest," "The Fear," "Spring Pools," "The Thatch," "Sand Dunes," "The Strong Are Saying Nothing," "The Draft Horse," "The Silken Tent," and "Willful Homing." This is a list of moral ambiguity and suspended grief, of stark horror and shy confusion—if Frost was a confusion to himself, we should, part of the time, be as confused and surprised by the Frost we read.

"The Code" starts with three men haying a field under an advancing thundercloud:

> There were three in the meadow by the brook
> Gathering up windrows, piling cocks of hay,
> With an eye always lifted toward the west
> Where an irregular sun-bordered cloud
> Darkly advanced with a perpetual dagger
> Flickering across its bosom. Suddenly
> One helper, thrusting pitchfork in the
> ground,
> Marched himself off the field and home. One
> stayed.
> The town-bred farmer failed to understand.

The farmhand's action is as abrupt as a scrawl of lightning, and the rest of the poem sets out to explain it. Silence has the force of speech in Frost, but this is one of the few places where silence is interpreted. The opening lines might seem just an excuse for a story, the story the remaining farmhand goes on to tell about another haying, another farmer who offended the code—in a more straightforward mood (even a rambling storyteller like Frost generally got on with things) the prologue could have been dispensed with. But the action is not just about the code, it is in code—a tale is required to explain the tale. The poem's lovely, lopsided organization is rougher and more



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accidental than in Frost's conservative dramas—the reader almost requires doubt about the form, as an imitative action. Only gradually is it clear that the second tale is in code as well—that the second farmhand is delivering a genial threat.

> "But the old fool seizes his fork in both hands,
> And looking up bewhiskered out of the pit,
> Shouts like an army captain, 'Let her come!'
> Thinks I, D'ye mean it? 'What was that you
> said?'
> I asked out loud, so's there'd be no mistake,
> 'Did you say, "Let her come"?' 'Yes, let her
> *come*.'
> He said it over, but he said it softer.
> Never you say a thing like that to a man,
> Not if he values what he is. God, I'd as soon
> Murdered him as left out his middle name.
> I'd built the load and knew right where to find
> it.
> Two or three forkfuls I picked lightly round for
> Like meditating, and then I just dug in
> And dumped the rackful on him in ten lots.
> I looked over the side once in the dust
> And caught sight of him treading-water-like,
> Keeping his head above. 'Damn ye,' I says,
> 'That gets ye!' He squeaked like a squeezed
> rat.
> That was the last I saw or heard of him.
> I cleaned the rack and drove out to cool off."

"I went about to kill him fair enough," the hand says later—he can afford to be so casual (death is often casual in Frost) because he knows his actions were understood, part of the code, never written down, by which men get along with one another. The farmer didn't die, but he earned his life at the cost of a lesson. The force of the poem is in the implicating conduct of different stories: the squall of violence when the farmhand throws down his pitchfork, the patient explanation of the second farmhand (a code of courtesy here), the town-bred farmer's incomplete understanding of what he's been told, the silent courtesy of the threat which the remaining farmhand delivers. The farmer has been warned—that is part of the code, too. Frost lets each of these stories rustle over the others (he knows something about literary codes as well); but the poem would never be effective without his warm feeling for the way men work, their stiff prides and dishonors, the lies they tell themselves.

The texture of those prides is in the texture of the details, the force that starts as invention and ends as a kind of second life: that "bewhiskered" farmer, about to be whiskered in hay; the ominous way the farmer "said it over, but he said it softer"; the almost meditative construction (*more* codes), "I'd as soon/ Murdered him as left out his middle name"; the further meditative gesture of the farmhand picking "lightly round" the hay (how lovely to describe it as a kind of meditation); and that terrible sound, that terrible image, of the farmer squeaking "like a squeezed rat" (there is danger throughout—recall that "perpetual dagger" in the storm cloud). Running through the poem, as in the best of Frost, is the haunted echo of men's speech. Frost's pentameter is always too dependent on monosyllables, like the speech of most men, and here and there the lines are posed or stilted; but most of a century later these sound like men talking, not like men writing.

"A Hundred Collars" starts in a similar offhand way—a man misses a train, is forced to lodge at a local hotel, but the hotel is full. He doesn't want to share a room—he doesn't *want* to, and Frost conveys with typical economy the apprehension that rises in such a man on such a night. He'd like to know who's in the room already:

> "Who is it?"
>
> "A man."
>
> "So I should hope. What kind of man?"
>
> "I know him: he's all right. A man's a man.
> Separate beds, of course, you understand."
> The night clerk blinked his eyes and dared
> him on.



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"Who's that man sleeping in the office chair?
Has he had the refusal of my chance?"

"He was afraid of being robbed or murdered.
What do you say?"

"I'll have to have a bed."

His resistance collapses, but not before he endures the delicious malice of the night clerk (the whole point of "A man's a man" is that it isn't true—a man's a man until he's a murderer). It's an old traveler's fear. Frost has to specify the separate beds—that should remind us not only of the close quarters earlier travelers had to tolerate, but of the scene in Chapter 3 of *Moby-Dick*, where Ishmael has to share a bed with Queequeg at the Spouter-Inn (the landlord there is more considerate—when Ishmael is reluctant, he starts to plane down a rough bench). It's one of the most gripping scenes in American fiction—the exhausted young man, reconciled to a bed with the strange harpooner (who's off somewhere selling a shrunken head); the young man finally in bed in the freezing room, on a mattress that seems "stuffed with corn-cobs or broken crockery"; Ishmael awoken by the entry of Queequeg (tattooed like a checkerboard, still holding the unsold head), who gets into bed smoking his tomahawk and then wildly threatens the young man he finds there. When Ishmael wakes the next morning, Queequeg's arm is thrown over him "in the most loving and affectionate manner."

Melville's scene turns maternal and comic there, and the trust between Ishmael and Queequeg is sealed by their night together. Frost has only a scholar and a subscriptions agent to work with, and he toys longer with the dread. The agent is named Lafe.

The Doctor looked at Lafe and looked away.
A man? A brute. Naked above the waist,
He sat there creased and shining in the light,
Fumbling the buttons in a well-starched shirt.
"I'm moving into a size-larger shirt.
I've felt mean lately; mean's no name for it.
I just found what the matter was tonight:
I've been a-choking like a nursery tree
When it outgrows the wire band of its name tag.
I blamed it on the hot spell we've been having.
'Twas nothing but my foolish hanging back,
Not liking to own up I'd grown a size.
Number eighteen this is. What size do you wear?"

The Doctor caught his throat convulsively.
"Oh—ah—fourteen—fourteen."

Every gesture is alive with threat—the half-naked man talks of being "mean lately," talks of choking (a scholar the least sensitive to language would flinch at the latent violence). We're delighted with the unease which Frost so easily manufactures—but we're uneasy too. Frost sets the reader even with the characters—we're given no more information than the Doctor, and we must feel our way as clumsily. Lafe wants to know his collar size because . . . because he wants to give the Doctor a hundred old collars. But we're frightened to take anything from those we fear—what would be generosity seems only a further threat, perhaps even a trick. Frost has taken his character into the worst of fear—and then Lafe offers to take off the Doctor's shoes! Each clumsy action allows a new misinterpretation. The Doctor's poised to run away—but Lafe's only worried about the landlord's sheets. (Who but Frost, his eye on the meanness and misgivings, would pause for the beautiful line where Lafe, though half-naked, seems *to be* his shirt, all "creased and shining"?)

Eventually they find themselves in hobbled conversation, which leads to one of Frost's typical passages of observation, plain and circumstantial, but with the consuming conscience of character:

"It's business, but I can't say it's not fun.
What I like best's the lay of different farms,
Coming out on them from a stretch of woods,
Or over a hill or round a sudden corner.
I like to find folks getting out in spring,
Raking the dooryard, working near the house.
Later they get out further in the fields.



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Everything's shut sometimes except the barn;
The family's all away in some back meadow.
There's a hay load a-coming—when it comes.
And later still they all get driven in:
The fields are stripped to lawn, the garden
patches
Stripped to bare ground, the maple trees
To whips and poles. There's nobody about.
The chimney, though, keeps up a good brisk
smoking.
And I lie back and ride."

How calmly and warmly and suggestively this is rendered, like harvest scenes from a medieval calendar—or like Wordsworth's first view of London in *The Prelude*. There's that beautiful surveyor's phrase, "the lay of different farms"; the simplicity of feeling in "I like to find folks getting out in spring"; the long patience of "There's a hay load a-coming—when it comes," even if we now think "a-coming" a bit corny (corny, but country); the visual fable of "The fields are stripped to lawn"; and then Brueghel's barren landscape of winter. It's not important to the poem—it's just there, like the landscape, the way that the characters are just there, accidentally thrown together and forced to make something like peace. So many of Frost's effects are almost negligent, as if they just happened. The scholar remains wary even at the last—that is *his* character. All his knowledge is no use in judging men—even when Frost disliked men like the Doctor, it was with fondness and understanding. That was what they were—and Frost's poetry is about the way men are. It would take so little for the Doctor just to accept the collars, yet all he can say is, "But really I—I have so many collars." (This is one of many times that Frost's meter allows a trembling hesitation of emphasis.) "There's nothing I'm afraid of like scared people," says Lafe.

Frost knew when to let a poem go—in his best poems the ending comes as a slight shock, as if the poem *couldn't* be over (in his worst the reader feels the poem shouldn't have begun). The actions seem to move beyond the end of the lines—this is an old trick in fiction, but how many poets have used it well? Fiction wouldn't have served Frost's temper (if he'd been a novelist he might have written something awfully like *Ethan Frome*), but when we place him it must be alongside those moody gothics Hawthorne and Melville, the New England geniuses of guilt and redemption, and failures to redeem. Something of the violent Fate that moves their fiction moves through his verse, but it is a Fate blinder and more callous. Here is "The Draft Horse":

With a lantern that wouldn't burn
In too frail a buggy we drove
Behind too heavy a horse
Through a pitch-dark limitless grove.

And a man came out of the trees
And took our horse by the head
And reaching back to his ribs
Deliberately stabbed him dead.

The ponderous beast went down
With a crack of a broken shaft.
And the night drew through the trees
In one long invidious draft.

The most unquestioning pair
That ever accepted fate
And the least disposed to ascribe
Any more than we had to to hate,

We assumed that the man himself
Or someone he had to obey
Wanted us to get down
And walk the rest of the way.

This is the Frost who makes readers uncomfortable. We ought to be able to call it an allegory—but no allegory suggests itself (or, rather, the allegories are too simple for the savagery). The murder of the horse is so abrupt, so unforeseen, that the murderer seems more than just part of that unknowable agency that makes life harder (no memory "keeps the end from being hard," Frost wrote in "Provide, Provide"). The couple, with their faulty lantern and fragile buggy, with the wrong horse, are destined



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for trouble—and how Frost loved those scary old woods. (One critic asked—this is the sort of question critics *should* ask—why the couple had hitched a draft horse to a buggy. The answer should have been obvious—because they had to.) Frost knew more about depravity than any American writer after Melville and before Faulkner—and he had a cellar knowledge of our irrational fears (Frost tells us the man stabbed the horse *deliberately*; but first, in the way he grips the horse's head, Frost shows us deliberation). This is the Frost people don't *want* to care for, and yet look how compellingly the poem ends. The couple don't curse their fate; they're so unquestioning they seem slightly stupid. Yet isn't this a philosophy, a kind of clear religion, not "to ascribe/ Any more than we had to to hate"? As readers we know we wouldn't act this way, and we're not finally sure that we *should* act this way—but we're not sure we *shouldn't*, either. That makes Frost strange, and us, in our settled, suspicious natures, ill at ease.

Frost's simplicity is deceptive, because it deepens so pitilessly into complication. When we say a man is complex, we mean we're not sure of his responses; and in Frost we're often measured by the way we read. Consider "Sand Dunes," a poem that starts so plainly it hardly starts at all:

> Sea waves are green and wet,
> But up from where they die
> Rise others vaster yet,
> And those are brown and dry.
>
> They are the sea made land
> To come at the fisher town
> And bury in solid sand
> The men she could not drown.
>
> She may know cove and cape,
> But she does not know mankind
> If by any change of shape
> She hopes to cut off mind.
>
> Men left her a ship to sink:
> They can leave her a hut as well;
> And be but more free to think
> For the one more cast-off shell.

Without the title, the first stanza might be opaque; but the shore is where waves die, and the dunes rise from the tide-line. "They are the sea made land"—this might be mere ingenuity, a metaphor of sand, but Frost's idea is more peculiar: the dunes are the macabre way the sea will conquer the fishermen it hasn't been able to drown. (Dunes *could* bury a village—I saw them bury a cemetery once.) Even here, when Death and Fate and the Sea all seem inexorable, the poem hasn't finished. The sea isn't clever enough! If Frost were a worse poet, he'd linger here, and tell us that men can abandon a philosophy or an idea—but he doesn't. His men are like hermit crabs—he *says* they'll be freer to think, but we remember that for hermit crabs life is just one abandoned shell after another.

"Sand Dunes" is a trial piece for a poem more poignant and more Stygian, "Neither out Far Nor in Deep"—think of the syntactic organization of the last stanzas. It shows how good Frost can be when he isn't great, and how disturbing and not quite settled even his settled endings are. Frost is always catching his readers out—he is a poet disastrous to underestimate (even in his late poems there are words, lines, sometimes a stanza or two, that have the old rough homemade truth in them).

No one thinks that the sea really has designs on the land—or no one would think it, if Frost hadn't said so. His fantasies have a primitive agency, a primitive terror—and don't men act at times *as if* they believed what Frost is only whimsical about? His poems require not that we believe them, but that we know we could believe them if we were different—that is, if we were Frost. This slight offness or strangeness lets his readers take as pleasant fictions what would otherwise be unpleasant truths, though that doesn't make the truths less unpleasant. "The Bearer of Evil Tidings" might have been written by Kipling—it is no more than a fantasy about a cliché:



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The bearer of evil tidings,
When he was halfway there,
Remembered that evil tidings
Were a dangerous thing to bear.

So when he came to the parting
Where one road led to the throne
And one went off to the mountains
And into the wild unknown,

He took the one to the mountains.
He ran through the Vale of Cashmere,
He ran through the rhododendrons
Till he came to the land of Pamir.

This seems to be a poem about cowardice; but by one of those reversals that drive Frost's poems into the blackness of our psychologies, it is really about prudence.

She taught him her tribe's religion:
How, ages and ages since,
A princess en route from China
To marry a Persian prince

Had been found with child; and her army
Had come to a troubled halt.
And though a god was the father
And nobody else at fault,

It had seemed discreet to remain there
And neither go on nor back.
So they stayed and declared a village
There in the land of the Yak.

Frost is good about religion—his distrust is wolfish and cagy. The Christian religion *has* to say that its god was the father of Jesus—otherwise there would be no religion. The Oriental army advances under a similar suspension of disbelief; but acts in just that bothersome human way Frost loves, accepting enough to believe, doubting enough not to go on or back. (As readers we know that Frost is still thinking Christian thoughts.)

And that was why there were people
On one Himalayan shelf;
And the bearer of evil tidings
Decided to stay there himself.

At least he had this in common
With the race he chose to adopt:
They had both of them had their reasons
For stopping where they had stopped.

As for his evil tidings,
Belshazzar's overthrow,
Why hurry to tell Belshazzar
What soon enough he would know?

Few things escape Frost's brutal wryness here (though look at how delicately he suggests that other shelves have other stories). *They had both of them had their reasons*—this doesn't mean that the reasons are good or honorable. The reasons for sacrifice (honor, integrity, loyalty to country or king) are never argued here—Frost knows all about them already. It is the small salvation of the slightly disreputable case that interests him. After all, the news would have had no effect on the outcome—Belshazzar was already overthrown. The poem might have stopped just before the last, throwaway stanza; but then it wouldn't have drifted beyond our expectations. A reader almost forgets that those evil tidings had somewhere to get to. That is the cold form of Frost's genius, and genius allows no pity for Belshazzar.

Frost's poems often find something human but distasteful in knowledge and belief—not just religion's set beliefs, but the beliefs men have to accept to get from one day to another. He recognizes that belief can be a weakness, that strength often requires a restraint. "The Strong Are Saying Nothing" ends there, but it starts in a casual, causal, haphazard way.

The soil now gets a rumpling soft and damp,
And small regard to the future of any weed.
The final flat of the hoe's approval stamp
Is reserved for the bed of a few selected seed.

There is seldom more than a man to a harrowed
piece.
Men work alone, their lots plowed far apart,
One stringing a chain of seed in an open crease,
And another stumbling after a halting cart.



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To the fresh and black of the squares of early
mold
The leafless bloom of a plum is fresh and white;
Though there's more than a doubt if the
weather is not too cold
For the bees to come and serve its beauty aright.

Wind goes from farm to farm in wave on wave,
But carries no cry of what is hoped to be.
There may be little or much beyond the grave,
But the strong are saying nothing until they see.

How lovely that "rumpling" in the first line is, and how ambiguous that "harrowed" later on. There is much in the loneliness of the way these men work, in that farmer "stumbling after a halting cart." The brilliance of Frost's poems is often in these acts of notice, in the contrast between the harrowed soil (retaining the decay in that other sense of "mold") and the white plum blossoms. Frost isn't a poet for mere beauty. The beauty of the plum tree comes ripe with disaster: if the weather is too cold for the bees, the beauty will not be served with plums. It's as if to say, "Beauty is all very well, in its place, but what's really important is the homely old plum." This isn't the point of the poem, but it leads to the point by a roundabout way. Farming is the faith and hope of seeds, the religion of what comes after—suddenly we're in a poem about death. Frost's farmers don't trust anything they can't see. It might be tempting to predict a crop, and for many men it's tempting to predict what lies beyond the grave. It takes a kind of strength, Frost is saying, to resist from hope—those harrowed fields are bleak and biblical.

Frost could barely think of beauty without thinking of death. At times it made him arch and melodramatic, those two sins of Romantic character (there's a self-congratulatory cruelty to the end of the mawkish "Out, Out—"—the boy probably died from bad doctoring and an overdose of ether); but usually he just suffered his understandings, half sad and half stoic. He knew how much death cost the people who survived, how much even the prospect of death cost them. The odd little poem "Not to Keep" is about a wounded soldier, sent home to his wife. She thinks that they've escaped, that the war is over for them; but she cannot see his wound. Finally she has to ask, and he has to tell her—the wound is severe enough to send him home, but not to keep him home. He has to go back to war.

Frost is a master of what people have to endure for one another. The visual arts have never been much good at showing what people say without saying, but in "Not to Keep" it is all there in a line or two. (The movies cheat and use music, and perhaps you could say that de la Tour cheated with light and with significant glances.) It's easy to forget how much Frost does not say in his poems, how much power lies in his reticence.

Frost was unashamed of writing as a man (not for other men, but about other men), in a way that would almost be impossible now. The women in Frost's poetry usually stand apart from the action, like a Greek chorus—and yet we've had few poets who understood women better. How many wonderful women he created as characters: the wife in "The Death of the Hired Man" and the wife in "Home Burial," the Witch of Coös and the Pauper Witch of Grafton, the wife in "The Fear" and the depressed wife in "A Servant to Servants," the mother in "The Housekeeper," the wife of "In the Home Stretch." There's a fine anthology to be made merely from Frost's women, merely from Frost's wives (Frost must have been a bit afraid of women—in the dialogues, the women usually come off better than the men). Frost wasn't ashamed of being a man, and that gave him an understanding of women—not *the* understanding, but an understanding that can only come from liking what women are. It shows in poems like "The Silken Tent."

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when a sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,



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And its supporting central cedar pole,
That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signifies the sureness of the soul,
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
By countless silken ties of love and thought
To everything on earth the compass round,
And only by one's going slightly taut
In the capriciousness of summer air
Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

The language here (that "sunny summer breeze," that "gently sways at ease") doesn't have the considered simplicity of the best of Frost—Frost hovered around clichés so often that sometimes he just lit on them. From the middle of the poem onward, however, this metaphysical conceit (how rarely that plain old lover-of-metaphysics Robert Frost chose to be metaphysical) gains from the force of its slightly self-conscious, off-the-shelf poetic language; and the concentration of the final three lines can scarcely be equalled. Reading those lines, the reader finds something pulling taut in him, too. The awkwardness is an homage to feeling, as it was in Hardy.

This doesn't mean that Frost understood all women, or even specific women. Many of his best poems recognize the mystery between women and men—the mystery that is misunderstanding. The insignificant incident of "The Exposed Nest" starts in that kind of misunderstanding:

You were forever finding some new play.
So when I saw you down on hands and knees
In the meadow, busy with the new-cut hay,
Trying, I thought, to set it up on end,
I went to show you how to make it stay,
If that was your idea, against the breeze,
And, if you asked me, even help pretend
To make it root again and grow afresh.
But 'twas no make-believe with you today,
Nor was the grass itself your real concern,
Though I found your hand full of wilted fern,
Steel-bright June-grass, and blackening heads
of clover.
'Twas a nest full of young birds on the ground
The cutter bar had just gone champing over. . . .

The woman wants to make it right, somehow (how many opportunities this poem gives to modern critics, those crippled descendants of Freud). Few passages in Frost are as rich with the inevitability of death as "your hand full of wilted fern,/ Steel-bright June-grass, and blackening heads of clover." The couple are trying to do the impossible, to restore the entire field so the mother bird won't abandon the nest. The field has a mortal beauty, like a Van Gogh; but Frost isn't interested in that. He sees "The way the nest-full every time we stirred/ Stood up to us as to a mother-bird/ Whose coming home has been too long deferred." There isn't much time for these nestlings—and the couple don't know if their meddling will make things worse. They work on anyway.

We saw the risk we took in doing good,
But dared not spare to do the best we could
Though harm should come of it; so built the
screen
You had begun, and gave them back their
shade.
All this to prove we cared. Why is there then
No more to tell? We turned to other things.
I haven't any memory—have you?—
Of ever coming to the place again
To see if the birds lived the first night
through,
And so at last to learn to use their wings.

The poem abandons the nestlings, as the couple did, when everything that could be done had been done—even if they'd done the wrong thing. Without quite saying so (Frost's poems are expert in not quite saying so), the poem has sketched the boundary of this couple's lives: the way the man assumes the woman is playing; the way he wants to show her how to do what she's doing (*just like a man*, we might think now); the way the end acknowledges not just that there are other matters, but that some matters must be abandoned. That some things need to be left alone insinuates darkly into these lives—there is a risk to what kindness can do, a risk and a limit. But sometimes you have to be kind anyway.



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The men and women in Frost often stare bleakly past each other. It's not that they have too little to say, but that they have too much. Those birds, or birds very much like them, disturb the complacent rage of the speaker in "The Thatch." He has stormed out of his thatched cottage, into the winter rain, and won't come back until his wife puts out the bedroom light. She won't put out the light until he comes in. Their cast-iron mulishness might last forever—it has the inevitability of myth (Frost is good about the mean things that make us mulish—however leathery the moral quality in his souls, he sees their weakness, too). But . . .

> as I passed along the eaves,
> So low I brushed the straw with my sleeves,
> I flushed birds out of hole after hole,
> Into the darkness. It grieved my soul,
> It started a grief within a grief,
> To think their case was beyond relief—
> They could not go flying about in search
> Of their nest again, nor find a perch.
> They must brood where they fell in mulch
> and mire,
> Trusting feathers and inward fire
> Till daylight made it safe for a flyer.
> My greater grief was by so much reduced
> As I thought of them without nest or roost.
> That was how that grief started to melt.

He didn't mean to bother those birds, didn't mean to add their hardship to his; but that's the way anger is (it's no use arguing with Frost that anger isn't always this way). The innocent suffer, sometimes without knowing the cause of suffering. The man can do nothing to repair the injury, and there's a naked recognition in that remarkable line, "It started a grief within a grief" (a line that echoes in the scarring ambiguity of "brood"). Frost tended to jingle in couplets (his ear grew unsure when his rhymes were too close together), but here the jingling underlines the absurdity of a man standing out in the rain to prove a point. And some of those rhymes are canny—that hollow, eaten-out "soul" is rhymed with "hole"; the "grief" is intimately bound, not with "relief," but with "beyond relief."

Those tangles of grief and regret between men and women, regret and sometimes the kindness of regret, radiate in odd directions. In "Place for a Third" (what an awful maker of titles Frost was—sometimes they're slapped on like gummed labels), a man wants to respect his wife's dying wishes. She's had three husbands, he's had three wives; and she doesn't want to lie with the other women.

> One man's three women in a burial row
> Somehow made her impatient with the man.
> And so she said to Laban, "You have done
> A good deal right; don't do the last thing
> wrong.
> Don't make me lie with those two other
> women."
>
> Laban said, No, he would not make her lie
> With anyone but that she had a mind to,
> If that was how she felt, of course, he said.
> She went her way. But Laban having caught
> This glimpse of lingering person in Eliza,
> And anxious to make all he could of it
> With something he remembered in himself,
> Tried to think how he could exceed his
> promise,
> And give good measure to the dead, though
> thankless.

It's a surprise to him, "This glimpse of lingering person" (what a judicious, delighting phrase); but he wants to give to the dead just measure, or measure more than just. He thinks of buying her a plot of her own:

> He'd sell a yoke of steers to pay for it.
> And weren't there special cemetery flowers,
> That, once grief sets to growing, grief may
> rest;
> The flowers will go on with grief awhile,
> And no one seem neglecting or neglected?
> A prudent grief will not despise such aids.

This is typical of Frost. Laban will grieve, but he'll be practical, too. How can we not admire a character whose complications come so coiled in pathos, whose trivial



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economies lie next to absurd generosities? (That yoke of steers is a sacrifice—they had to be *trained* to the yoke.) He thinks of a better way of satisfying his duty, and his love: he'll bury her next to the boy she first loved, who lived in a neighboring town. He finds the grave (it's marked *John, Beloved Husband*, but we're never told where John's wife lies—that may be another story), and Laban goes to plead his case before the dead man's sister.

> The sister's face
> Fell all in wrinkles of responsibility.
> She wanted to do right. She'd have to think.
> Laban was old and poor, yet seemed to care;
> And she was old and poor—but she cared, too.
> They sat. She cast one dull, old look at him,
> Then turned him out to go on other errands
> She said he might attend to in the village,
> While she made up her mind how much she cared—
> And how much Laban cared—and why he cared.
> (She made shrewd eyes to see where he came in.)

Here the run of shortened sentences follows the short reversals of a mind at odds. She's shrewd, but not heartless. Finally she can't consent; and she tells Laban through a closed screen door (how good Frost was at paltry details). The reason's so funny it's almost sad: "'There wouldn't be no sense./ Eliza's had too many other men.'" The poem might have ended there, but it can't—it would *be* a bad joke. Laban goes back to his first plan, to buy Eliza her own plot: it "gives him for himself a choice of lots/ When his time comes to die and settle down." That "settle down" is terrifying. Frost's disquiet about the afterlife usually revealed a disquiet about our arrangements in this one; and death here is "settling down" in a way we usually don't like to think of (earlier, death is made almost willful—"She went her way"). We understand too little of people if we don't appreciate how they can be canny and caring at the same time—and the abyss that remains between them.

Frost's poetry is one long exploitation of a fairly limited notion about character, and yet to the limitations what a rare and brush-fine rendering he brings. There is more truth in Frost's simplicities, his love of morals and homilies and examples, than in all the dull rattle of autobiography on which our poetry now subsists (*This was my life*, our poems protest, as if having a life were the same as having art). How interested Frost seems in other people—and yet how interesting that makes *him* seem. The problem is not that Frost is too simple for us; it's that we are too simple for him.

"Snow" is another of Frost's wretched claustrophobic dramas. There's a blizzard. The Coles have been wakened by a visitor, a preacher trying to get home after a prayer meeting. He's named Meserve, one of those cross-grained back-country names, and he's a preacher in some back-country Christian sect. He calls his wife to tell her he's still on the way. The couple want him to stay the night, but they can't make themselves make him stay; and he's stubborn enough to go on (stubborn enough to have gone to town to preach on such a night). Much of the poem consists of the couple squabbling, in a half-fond, half-irritated marital way—the poem is almost as long as "The Waste Land." Meserve goes out to the barn to check his horses, and when he comes back they plead with him to stay.

> Meserve seemed to heed nothing but the lamp
> Or something not far from it on the table.
> By straightening out and lifting a forefinger,
> He pointed with his hand from where it lay
> Like a white crumpled spider on his knee:
> "That leaf there in your open book! It moved
> Just then, I thought. It's stood erect like that,
> There on the table, ever since I came,
> Trying to turn itself backward or forward,
> I've had my eye on it to make out which:
> If forward, then it's with a friend's impatience—
> You see I know—to get you on to things
> It wants to see how you will take; if backward,
> It's from regret for something you have passed
> And failed to see the good of. Never mind,



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> Things must expect to come in front of us
> A many times—I don't say just how many—
> That varies with the things—before we see
> them.
> One of the lies would make it out that nothing
> Ever presents itself before us twice.
> Where would we be at last if that were so?
> Our very life depends on everything's
> Recurring till we answer from within.

The symbol is too available here—the book is no doubt the Bible. (What other book, likely to lie open in a farmhouse, has pages so thin they might stir in the lightest breeze—and what else does Meserve "heed"? And yet why doesn't he name it?) The preacher's hesitation makes the moment less certain; he can't say when we'll see the way things are, and there's more than a shiver of apocalypse in his speech—a preacher who thinks about what comes again (which our lives depend on, when we will "answer from within") is half thinking of the Second Coming. The couple don't much like Meserve, and they're angry with him because they're afraid for him (if he dies in the blizzard, they'll feel responsible). There's something else, something not quite said in the poem—the wife and Meserve were apparently friendly as children. The couple go back and forth with him, and she makes one last attempt:

> "But why, when no one wants you to, go on?
> Your wife—she doesn't want you to. We don't,
> And you yourself don't want to. Who else is
> there?"
>
> "Save us from being cornered by a woman.
> Well, there's—" She told Fred afterward that in
> The pause right there, she thought the dreaded
> word
> Was coming, "God." But no, he only said,
> "Well, there's—the storm. That says I must
> go on.
> That wants me as a war might if it came.
> Ask any man."

How crafty Frost is. He wants Meserve to surprise us, but it's more of a surprise if we know the *expected* answer—making sure causes a delay, and delay heightens the expectation.

Meserve goes off into the blizzard. "It's quiet as an empty church without him," the husband says. He means to say only that the storm of Meserve's presence having passed, they are left in a strange silence. But Meserve is a preacher, and they are left in the church a preacher has abandoned. They are still *inside* a church—the church of their wintry home, their narrow tight religion of each other. And yet that church feels forsaken—as if the god (the word Meserve hasn't said) has passed out of it, too. We know that when a church is empty, the god's still there; and yet an empty church can feel less than spiritual, just an empty warehouse. What devastating resonances this simple line lets loose, and how long it takes to explain poems that so simply explain themselves.

Hours later Meserve's wife calls—he still hasn't returned. The couple descend to new guilt; they admire and despise Meserve for being what he is. They try to ring her back, but she's left the phone off the hook. (This is an early village party-line system—her number's 21, just two digits, and when her phone's off the hook they can hear the sounds in her house without ringing her.) Then Meserve calls—he's come home. The couple should be relieved, but they're not, quite. A tremor has gone through their lives. Perhaps they'll just forget it. The nearness of death; the icy white desolation of the night (Meserve remembers something he heard a boy say: "You can't get too much winter in the winter"); the runty and nearly repulsive Meserve, down to the lovely, horrible description of his hand, "Like a white crumpled spider"—it's a winter nightmare, all below-freezing anxiety. Frost knows not to let the couple subside into forgiveness, or rise to pure irritation. Frost used dialogue as well as Eliot or Joyce—he may be nineteenth-century in his philosophy (early Frost sounds as if it were written before Darwin), but he's modern in his voices. Eliot caught something of the Twenties when his characters spoke, but Frost's characters are almost our contemporaries.



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I don't have space—though I wish I had space—to discuss that wintry companion piece, "Willful Homing"; or that mysterious poem "The Fear" (with that wonderful line, "I saw it just as plain as a white plate"); or the ending of "A Brook in the City," where the hidden won't stay hidden (Freud might have written such a poem, if he hadn't *been* a poem). Let me end, since I've lingered so long in the bleaker regions of Frost, with something almost springlike, "Spring Pools":

> These pools that, though in forests, still reflect
> The total sky almost without defect,
> And like the flowers beside them, chill and shiver,
> Will like the flowers beside them soon be gone,
> And yet not out by any brook or river,
> But up by roots to bring dark foliage on.
>
> The trees that have it in their pent-up buds
> To darken nature and be summer woods—
> Let them think twice before they use their powers
> To blot out and drink up and sweep away
> These flowery waters and these watery flowers
> From snow that melted only yesterday.

The pools reflect the whole sky because the forest leaves haven't come on (the "defect" would be the thin high branches). Their nearly faultless reflections, like barely scratched mirrors, must give way to a darker nature. The darkness in the forest means only the leaves; but we know what Frost *really* means. He was such a plain poet in his words (he so rarely tried for those "poetic" effects of sound and usage which most poets live on like the air—a plant that does that is an epiphyte), but such a devious man in his lines. This doesn't mean that he couldn't be ornamental when he chose—there's that beautiful chiasmus here, "These flowery waters and these watery flowers," and think of the ornate line from "The Black Cottage," "A buttoned haircloth lounge spread scrolling arms." But also think how later in that poem the minister rises briefly into "poetry," and then stops, as if embarrassed. Few poets have ever caught such power in plain speech; Frost's lines bear their ideas without the distraction of ornament, or with the least ornament necessary for the democracy of argument (how tangled the notions in the simple "pent-up" buds here—they're all raw DNA, with empires to build).

The complications are in the shrewdness of the said. How could the summer woods have that kind of fairy-tale darkness? There is no evil, and yet the loss of the pools is a minor kind of evil, just because it is a loss. "Let them think twice," Frost asks, but we know they won't, and can't. The snow has melted into pools, the pools melt away into foliage—the competing forces are just a long chain of sources, of dying supersessions. And yet something remains to be mourned, if we remember how transient our lives are, about to vanish with the silence of the pools. It takes a hard nature to be grateful for the use our lives are to others. Frost knew that necessity as a form of regret.

Frost was a vain and arrogant man, and some of his humility is merely vanity. But some of it is humility, too. He knew his poems might not always be of use—he knew his life had not been much use to those he loved. When we tire of "Birches" and "Mending Wall," of "After Apple-Picking" and "The Road Not Taken" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," of "Nothing Gold Can Stay" and "Fire and Ice" and all the other poems anthologized into the thick crust of our memories—after we have tired of these, there is another Frost, and another. The good in Frost often lies so close to the sentimental and bad, it is difficult to remember that some of the best-loved poems are the best, just as some are the worst and most trivial.

I've wanted here to be like Frost, to be a noticer of common things, of the uncommon in the common. Many of the poems in this other other Frost have caught the eyes of scholars (occasionally only to be dismissed—one weighty critic thought "The



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Code" and "A Hundred Collars" were "fatuously obvious"), but that has not saved them from general neglect. A reader who hasn't gone beyond the white picket fence of the poems everyone knows by heart will find in Jarrell's essays a remarkable unknown Frost (not quite as unknown now as then), and I hope another unknown Frost here. And I haven't had a word for the grim poverty of "The Housekeeper," for the chilling anecdote of "The Vanishing Red," for "The Ax-Helve" or the strange fable of "Paul's Wife" or the rough comedy of "Brown's Descent," for all the secret bitterness and knowledge in "Fireflies in the Garden," for "The Mountain" (I might as well nominate all of *North of Boston*) or the brilliantly handled monologue of "The Black Cottage" (which Jarrell likes and then calls "lesser") or "On Going Unnoticed."

Frost is a Vermont-granite original. He is strange in the way that Whitman is strange: inconsistent, knowing and yet unknowable, likely to go off on goose chases, self-satisfied and yet raging against self-satisfaction, moral and honest (even when a little immoral and dishonest), his bad jumbled with his good, and yet finally and unconsciously and proof-bright American, representative of even the striving, sentimental, blank and blinkered parts of being American. An art like Frost's is not just the residue of the country he inhabited, it is the factual prelude to that country's imaginative acts. If we want those strange citizens of the next millennium to know what it was to be American in the last centuries of this one, we could do worse than to bury, in Camden or Keokuk or Fresno, in Tie Siding or Pensacola or Hanover or Fort Smith, a lead box with the collected poems of Walt Whitman and Robert Frost.



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# Poems
## *by Richard Tillinghast, Donald Justice, John Clarke & Elizabeth Spires*

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### McLeod House:
### poem ending in a line by Milton

Imagine turbines at full roar,
Steel particles sparking, lit up by fluorescent tubes
Above an assembly line.
A machinist smoking, biceps tattooed, rebuilding a jet engine.
A farmer pulling stumps out of bottomland
With a mule and log-chain in the rain.
Or someone wringing a mop
Out, preparatory to swabbing a dining-hall floor.

Then think of this place and day:
Maples stippled with the first ambers and scarlets,
Chilled air into which sunlight
Does not force itself
But instills or decants.

McLeod House—a mustard-yellow clapboard mansion
With scrolled Ionic capitals and fluted columns—
Will have been pointed out
On your tour of the university.
Inside, smell beeswax, pipe tobacco, ink.

Before Independence craftsmen whose descendants
Sail yachts now, mitered oak for wainscoting, planed down
Broad planks of white pine from the King's forests in New Hampshire,
Sawed and hammered, plumbed and plastered; and then



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In the Twenties some threadbare survivor
Of a mercantile family with clippers east to Japan
Willed to Harvard this variorum of substance and labor.

Climb three dizzy flights, boards creaking underfoot
To a cell just wide enough to swing a cat in,
Which once roofed the dreams of Mary or Bridie or Bridget
From the bogs of Connemara, who cried at night
And cabled dollars to the home she wouldn't see again.

The current tenant lays a Dickensian fire in the grate,
Marks bluebooks, and daydreams—while surfing the Internet—
Of writing what the *TLS* will call "the definitive
History of the iamb." Until then he annotates bibliographies
And leaves fall like footnotes over Quincy Street.
Where else but McLeod House to take one's stand, filled with resolve
To scorn delights, and live laborious days?

*—Richard Tillinghast*



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## On an anniversary

Thirty years and more go by
In the blinking of an eye,
  And you are still the same
As when first you took my name.

Much the same blush now as then
Glimmers through the peach-pale skin.
  Time (but as with a glove)
Lightly touches you, my love.

Stand with me a minute still
While night climbs our little hill.
  Below, the lights of cars
Move, and overhead the stars.

The estranging years have come,
Come and gone, and we are home.
  Time joins us as a friend,
And the evening has no end.

—*Donald Justice*



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## Near-dweller

If we hadn't learned, too late,
that her few words

meant, "Listen,
listen for me elsewhere,"

we'd have heard her
when the white butterfly

kept turning his two pages
over the meadow;

or when at last the heron
folded a leg above

the leaf-fall water,
a blue mandolin no longer;

or when the thin-keeled moon
set out at dusk

and in an hour
foundered in sudden snow.

Oh, then one May
they had to force her door,

and neighbors came together—
more than we'd known—

and we heard voices
and voicelessness as well.

But she was never song,
nor silence either.

*—John Clarke*



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# Life everlasting

*The sweet earth opened out its wide four corners to her*
*like the petals of a flower ready to be picked, and it*
*shimmered with light and possibility till she was dizzy*
*with it. Her mother's voice, the feel of home, receded*
*for the moment, and her thoughts turned forward. Why,*
*she, too, might live forever in this remarkable world*
*she was only just discovering! The story of the spring—*
*it might be true!*
—Natalie Babbitt, *Tuck Everlasting*

On a night like any other night, in the house
of our life, foursquare and shining,
I read you the story of life everlasting,
a family in a time before our time,
traveling, where are they traveling to?
The wheels of their wagon turn as the world
turns because the world's a wheel, too,
and then the wheel slows down and stops
in the middle of a summer day hot enough
on a city sidewalk to fry an egg, except
there are no sidewalks here, only a pathless path
leading them, where does it lead to?
As through a telescope, far things seem near,
and near things close enough to touch.
We are, you and I, onlookers to a tale
where the curse will seem, at first, a gift
impossible to live with, impossible not to,
as a mother, a father, and a boy enter
a wood where trees sieve light to shadow,
and creatures stir and live without a thought
to death, the way, too briefly, Adam lived with Eve.
A giant ash presides there, its silver leaves
raised in silent benediction to the air,
while gnarled roots below are splayed
like the fingers of an ancient grasping hand
outspread upon the globe. A spring flows
round the roots, inviting them to drink.
How cold the water looks. How clear.
They drink deep draughts but don't know



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what they drink, enchanted water from a world
that lies underneath or side by side the one
we're in, flowing, flowing from Creation's
other side where all things live forever
in a garden rounded on all sides and bounded
by a wall that keeps out death and change.
Yes. Paradise. A plan that failed.
Creepers grow up the outside walls, attracted to
a brightness within that never wavers, never dies.

O waters of life! Eternal flowing waters!
Expelled from the world of time, our travelers
must wander now in a world where years flow
like a river around them, leaving them untouched.
They stay as they are, never a wrinkle or gray hair,
their clothes a perfect fit but threadbare.
Imagine their life as a line that starts somewhere,
the pencil held by an unseen hand that moves it
round and round the globe without a pause,
the pencil growing dull, the freighted sunrise,
seen for the ten-ten-thousandth time, too much
like yesterday's, tomorrow's, the stars without surprise,
each plate of food the same, the same, the same.

But all stories end in death, even this one,
because the boy falls in love with a girl, mortal
as we are, and gives her all he has to give:
he takes her to the spring and offers her the water.
She kneels, she cups her hands, as if . . .
We are deep in the story, too far in to turn back,
when you stop me with a cry—
"Mother, promise never to die!"
And with your words, death enters the picture,
and you refuse it, just as I did when I was five
and begged my mother for the cup, the pill
that would stop all change and keep me
as I was: a child with a store of endless days,
being read to in a bright room, no way
for death to intrude. How little I knew.
I was a child who would have drunk the cup.

But the girl at the spring, what does she choose?
She chooses *change*, a contract with the dead,



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and in the moment of her choosing, her childhood
disappears, she sees on the forking path ahead,
leafstrewn and windswept, strangers waiting
for her to catch up: a husband and a child,
her repetition, and beyond, the daughters
of her daughter, mere shadows to her now.
Who are these strangers but the dead come back?
She has made her choice but keeps the water anyway,
tightly stoppered in a vial, hidden away,
only she knows where, to take out and wonder at.
Sometimes alone she holds it to the light
and sees in the clear suspension that other life,
the one she didn't choose: a bright patchwork
of hill, field, and tree, gone now, to make way
for the town, and a boy tugging at her hand,
the two of them immortal as the sun.
Years pass, each one more quickly, until
she doubts her choice, if she was wise.
She keeps her sorrow private, as most sorrows are,
her thoughts wound tightly round themselves,
the way a thread is wound upon a spool.
*The world's too terrible to live in!*
*I hate the world!* she thinks. And goes on.
The world is shadowed and shining. Complete.
And torn. The bright drops in the vial cloud over,
her eyes are cloudy too, as she dies the death
we all die, having completed herself in time.

How late it is. You have fallen asleep,
safe in the words of a story that isn't safe at all.
I close the book, turn the light out, and leave
the door ajar. Tomorrow will you ask me
how the story ended? Or think you dreamed a dream,
strange and unsettling, the way dreams are?
What words complete a tale that ends in death for us all?

The boy returns a lifetime later, believing
he'll find her in the wood, just as she was,
just as he is now. She kept the water, after all.
She might have changed her mind.
He sees her apparition standing by the ash,
holding a hand out to him, warm, *alive*—
And touches instead



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cold stone, her name freshly engraved, her dates
enclosed in parentheses. No, it's all wrong.
He returns. He is free in a way we cannot imagine.
And perfectly alone. He sees her stone
and wonders again what made her choose against him.
And she, like Eve in death, a spectral presence,
begins to sing, her song rising above the world's
flat hum to move the trees, the stars, and pull him
backward to a wood that isn't there, a spring
where he drank of Time, unknowing, ignorant:
*O mortals, do not drink the waters!*
*All is in flux. All is shining.*
*The world is spread before you like a table, heavy and laden.*
*Milk must be poured into mugs and drunk down in great gulps,*
*and buttered toast heaped onto plates.*
*The pond is waiting to be rowed on.*
*The apple tree, with its reaching arms, wants to be climbed.*
*The fruit on the topmost branch must be taken in hand and eaten.*
*The swing, still in the early morning, must be swung on.*
*The dog must have its stick, its ball, even as the mockingbird*
*waits in shadow, waits to mock us all. Listen.*
*The tongues of bells are ringing in the sun*
*as we climb the bright hill, pause, and go back down.*
*Each thing is as it does. The world's a wheel.*
*And death flashes out at us, makes the world shine.*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

These are her words. Our only paradise is here,
and we are rich as misers, rich in change!
We hold in our empty hands a currency of days
that we must spend down to the very last,
no holding back allowed. But sleep now.
And I'll sleep, too, to wake with you,
wake to the everlasting present of our life.

*—Elizabeth Spires*



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Letter from Paris

# The literary stakes

*by Stephen Sartarelli*

Perhaps the most interesting development on the French cultural landscape of the last few years has been the crystallization of a kind of "opposition" to the reigning cultural norms, centered around an attempt to cast a critical eye, unobstructed by professional loyalties and interests, on the art and literature of the last three decades or so. Disgruntled with what they see as the low quality and the intellectual and aesthetic *laisser-aller* of much contemporary culture, and the apparent unwillingness of the art establishment and the cultural press to engage in any kind of open debate about it, a group of writers, many of them gathered around the intellectual review *Esprit*, have undertaken to analyze and debunk many of the basic premises of contemporary French culture and literature. For their efforts they have been tarbrushed variously as "philistine," "elitist," "passéiste," and worse, but they are too serious in purpose and too rigorous in method to be daunted by such facile dismissals. Nor, in many cases, is the label of "conservative," though brandished with relish against them, even applicable, at least not in any strict political sense. Mostly, they want to sort things out, to determine why so much contemporary literature and art, while initially praised to the skies by the cultural media—which in France are far more dominated by literary intellectuals than in the U.S.—does not appear to stand the test of time or intelligent scrutiny.

Some of those writing in this vein include Jean-Marie Domenach, cultural and social critic and former editor of *Esprit*, who this spring published a critique of contemporary French fiction entitled *Le Crépuscule de la culture française* (roundly panned by the mainstream press); Alain Besançon, whose recent book *L'Image interdite* attributes the decline of the French novel to a misguided attempt to imitate the banishment of figuration in painting, resulting in an erosion of the very devices that make fiction readable; the cultural philosopher and psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis, cited by Octavio Paz in his 1990 essay collection, *The Other Voice*, as someone attempting to offer the "beginning of a response" to the contradictions of modernity; Alain Nadaud, who attributes much of the failure of contemporary French literature to the unprecedented influence of the social sciences, especially in their structuralist and deconstructionist manifestations, on criticism and language in general; and Marc Chénetier, whose recent study of contemporary U.S. fiction, *Au-delà du soupçon*, claims that American writers have succeeded in "going beyond" the "suspiciousness" that confines so many of their French counterparts to the dictates of an overweening aesthetic ideology that few dare transgress.

One of the most compelling of these "new critics" is the essayist and novelist Jean-Philippe Domecq, former editor of the now defunct review *Quai Voltaire*, contributing



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editor of *Esprit*, and author of thirteen books. Quoted briefly in these pages last year, Domecq, who defines himself a social libertarian and progressivist, published two collections of essays in 1994: *Artistes sans art?*, which exposes the aesthetic and philosophical bankruptcy of most contemporary art and the art business and describes the peculiarly French ethos of "cultural correctness," according to which it is unacceptable and even professionally dangerous to question the methods and motives of the art industry; and *Le Pari littéraire* ("The Literary Stakes"), in which he directs his formidable powers of analysis and wit against the French fiction of the last few decades, which he finds wanting in substance and all too willing to provide what is expected of it: generally affectless, plotless, minimal situations derived from "avant-garde" premises (*viz.*, the "Nouveau Roman" à la Robbe-Grillet, or the "manifesto novel" à la Philippe Sollers) that have long lost whatever pertinence or aesthetic validity they may have had in their heyday.

In *Le Pari littéraire*, which appeared only a few months after the essays on art, Domecq raises a number of probing questions of general interest beyond their strict application to the realm of fiction. One of these concerns the term "postmodern" (of more frequent use in the U.S. and the U.K. than in France) as applied to that particular kind of fiction, called "impassive" in France, that engages in a return to narrative for narrative's sake, but at one remove, ironically winking, moving in an eventless realm numbed by an inchoate dullness and devoid of meaning, yet offering no serious discussion of this meaninglessness, since that might dispel the bored, arch tone that is supposed to suffice as commentary on our presumed condition. Some of the more recent practitioners of this sort of writing include Annie Ernaux, Jean Echenoz, and Michel Rio. They frequent a landscape derived in large part from Roland Barthes's "object literature," from which "humanism" and tragic circumstance have been banished (Anne Beattie might be our own, less theorized version of this), leaving ample room for increasing accumulations and jumblings of the detritus of contemporary and past cultures. To call such work "postmodern," says Domecq, is merely a way for the avant-garde ideology to avoid taking stock of its own problematic situation: "the opposition to the model has never been but one step in the process of innovation; by turning this step into a continual process, the imperative of rupture proper to the avant-garde ideology cuts it off from any free play with the forms handed down, without which one cannot create any new forms." In other words, the notion of a constant break with the immediate past, typical of the later avant-gardes that are the direct inspiration for much of the work under discussion here, has exhausted its possibilities when there is no longer anything to break with. Hence the "postmodern" conclusion that we can no longer create anything new, but only repeat, "ironically," the clichés of the past. If we have reached "the end of history," the "end of ideologies," if "signifying systems" and the "desire for unity" are oppressive and "reactionary," if meaning can only be relative in an "equitable" world, then nothing can actually be new anymore, not in any meaningful, *historically* significant way. Art can only be as new as today's news, then thrown away for tomorrow's avant-garde.

For Domecq, perhaps no one better embodies this self-contradictory loop of historicism and aesthetics than the novelist and literary theorist Philippe Sollers, co-founder and eventual sole chief of the review *Tel Quel* and the ever-changing group associated with it, and now editor of *L'Infini*, the magazine that followed in its wake. Initially embracing, around 1960, a kind of newfangled, experimentalist "art pour l'art" allied with the *nouveau roman* and opposed to the *littérature engagée* of the immediately preceding existentialists, Sollers and the *Tel Quel* group quickly joined ranks with the new linguistic and social theorists of structuralism (Barthes, Foucault, Genette, et al.), soon jettisoned the *nouveaux romanciers*, discovered



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leftist politics, then Mao—though they remained too close to the French Communist party to sympathize with the student rebels of '68, indeed too close even to condemn the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia that same year—all the while purging their group of anyone making so bold as to question all these opportunistic about-faces. During this same time, under the influence of new arrival and soon-to-be wife of Sollers, Julia Kristeva, their various dabblings yielded that dubious invention called "textual writing," a curious jumble of politics, literary theory, and self-expression whose presumed subversion of language was supposed to have social resonance despite its near-total incomprehensibility. By the early Seventies *Tel Quel* was launching salvos at the last remaining Surrealists, experienced some major defections (including the venerable old poet Francis Ponge, an *éminence grise* in the group from the start), and made a disappointing trip to China. By 1977, showing his usual skill at anticipating the way the wind will blow, Sollers announced the end of Marxism and psychoanalysis, seeing this as the cause for the "decline in avant-garde production." And thus the final twist, and the closing of the circle: "postmodern" *avant la lettre*, Sollers declared modern art "dead," for reasons much like those cited above.

In the meanwhile, however, as public relations had always been his greatest talent, Sollers's influence throughout the Parisian publishing and cultural world had grown immensely. The "death of the avant-garde" notwithstanding, the tyrannical reign of the social sciences over literary discourse that had been given such an early boost by the *Tel Quel* alliance between literary creation and theory was by now firmly entrenched in the French culture industry. Published by the Editions du Seuil, *Tel Quel* early on had started its own book series, Collection Tel Quel, with the same publisher, and thus had been in a position to make the careers of many young writers. Yet because of the group's longstanding strategic collaboration with the major French trendsetters in structural linguistics and criticism, its tastes conformed increasingly to a rigidly self-reflexive, "metatextual" aesthetic, an art that could only look at itself creating itself, without the passions and ideals that had fired the historic avant-gardes of the early century. The avant-garde had become merely the expression of a will-to-success.

For poet Jacques Roubaud, the literary generation of the 1960s was symbolized by a strange creature called the FLT—for "French Literary Theorist"—which he sees as a kind of "chimera," a "Tarasque," a "yapping animal"; the only relationship the *Tel Quel* group (whose intolerance he compares to that of the Pléiade poets) had to the "real writers" of the time—Perec, Queneau, Calvino—was to live by the principle: "Get out of our way." Roubaud compares the devastating effect that these "precious clowns of the 20th century" had on literature and poetry to that of an atomic bomb, vitrifying the literary landscape. Elsewhere, Angelo Rinaldi, novelist and literary critic for *L'Express*, describes the *Tel Quel* movement in the Sixties as follows: "The future belongs to dogma; the literary genre is now policed, surrounded by the sergeants of the language sciences blithely performing body searches of it."

And if, indeed, there is any doubt of the continuing influence of *le telquelisme* within the culture industry and the press, one need only consider all the noise in the major newspapers this spring about the newly published *Histoire de Tel Quel*, by Philippe Forest, a young Sollers acolyte. Not only did none of the mainstream cultural press criticize the entirely uncritical picture of the group presented in this book (indeed, one reviewer justified this by wondering whether it is even possible to talk about *Tel Quel* without taking sides); but not one even mentioned that the same Forest had written a near hagiographic biography of Sollers just three years earlier! Another example of the "invisible hand" of *Tel Quel*: in 1993 the French edition of a 1989 Harvard University Press study, *A New History of French Literature*, was published under the title *De la*



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*littérature française* (Editions Bordas), with a slight addition; apparently its French editors (with Denis Hollier *en tête*) had seen fit to "update" it with a new, final chapter on none other than monsieur Sollers, in spite of a generous earlier entry on *Tel Quel*.

Nor is Sollers's peculiar brand of aesthetic tyranny foreign to the peculiar conformism long in force in French cultural debate. Indeed, according to many, it is part and parcel of the very cronyism so widespread in the cultural professions here, and explains more than a little of the overwhelming consensus of approval drummed up for each "new talent" who happens to tip his hat to that "tradition," and the intolerance shown to dissenting opinions. Among the examples that could be cited of such intolerance are statements made last year by the chief book critic of *Le Monde*, Josyane Savigneau, in response to some sarcastic criticisms made of her by contributors to *Esprit*, who had lampooned the very sort of sophistic contortions she has to resort to toe the line: "creativity police," Mme Savigneau called them, and "surly little cops." A strange confusion of roles, it would seem, given the respective power of those two publications. In today's France, says Domecq, "you can say whatever you want about a politician, about a social ideology, about an economic matter, but you can no longer offer a reasoned judgment about any preposterously consecrated value in contemporary art or literature." The consensus in those fields is overwhelming, and immediately marginalizes the dissenting voice, confident of having the support of "historical precedent": i.e., the success of those setting the tone. This is no doubt made all the easier by the near-absolute centrality of the Parisian scene to French cultural debate. "This sort of historical self-positioning," writes Domecq,

> results in a dangerous confusion on the level of intellectual ethics, one that equates power with competence and influence with intellectual authority. . . . Today the debate over works [of literature and art] is tightly controlled as rarely before in this country with so strong a critical tradition. All critical expression is immediately subjected to a symmetrical inversion of positions and the dissident voice treated as reactionary, creating an ethical blur of a new sort likely to leave in its wake an unprecedented confusion of ideas.

Domecq, Domenach, Chénetier, and others believe the United States and Great Britain have been spared some of these conformistic constraints, at least as far as the production and discussion of fiction are concerned. While smacking somewhat of a "grass is greener" mentality—traditionally very un-French—this observation may be true, for now at any rate. Certainly the mechanisms of reception and debate are different in the U.S., and not nearly so centralized. And while structuralism and post-structuralism have certainly sunk roots in American and British university literature departments, fortunately the best in the language in fiction—Gaddis, McCarthy, Coetzee, Murdoch, etc.—remain sublimely indifferent to such squabbles. What is perhaps most unfortunate for the French, and lamented by many of the critics cited here, is that the younger writers of the last two or three decades have taken their cue not from their more formidable predecessors—Beckett, Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Simon, and Michel Tournier—but from the likes of Sollers, Duras, and Robbe-Grillet. Taking cognizance of this fact is at least a step in the right direction.



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Art

# Small wonder: the forgotten art of Giuseppe de Nittis

*by Mario Naves*

The splendor of nineteenth-century French painting is so much a part of that epoch that it is almost easy to overlook the fact that painting was going on elsewhere during that time. This is, of course, an exaggeration. Even the most dilatory student of art history can name a few nineteenth-century painters of distinction working outside of France: Constable and Turner in England, for instance, or maybe Homer in the United States. Yet there can be no denying the preeminence of French painting in that century, as well as at the beginning of our own. The extraordinary confluence of talent and genius that was Impressionism alone is all but inconceivable to us today, inured, as we are, to a culture predicated on the gratifications of irony and spectacle.

So who can blame Roberto Tassi, essayist of the catalogue accompanying the exhibition "Masterpieces of Nineteenth-Century Italian Painting from the Gaetano Marzotto Collection," for writing with an art-historical chip on his shoulder? [1] Catalogue essayists, by their very nature, are cheerleaders of a sort and Tassi is one who knows what he's up against. He is, after all, arguing the merits of a group of unrenowned artists—unrenowned outside of Italy, anyway—who call into question, albeit gingerly, the School of Paris while begrudgingly acknowledging its accomplishments. The organizers of the Marzotto Collection know what they're up against too. The introductory wall label states that one is "hard pressed to name an artist of stature working in Italy after Tiepolo and before the Futurists"—implying that, indeed, there were distinguished Italian painters working between those two points on the historical continuum. The Marzotto Collection is a show whose strongest offense, it would seem, is its defensiveness.

"Masterpieces of Nineteenth-Century Italian Painting," organized in commemoration of the centenary of Gaetano Marzotto's birth, consists of 120 paintings from the latter half of the nineteenth century. Marzotto was an industrialist of diverse interests, artistic as well as social, and his collection reflects a hard-headed credence in the tenable. Consequently, it abjures historical panoramas and mythical subjects for realist (one is tempted to say *commonplace*) paintings: landscapes, cityscapes, still lifes, and genre studies. Marzotto seems to have valued proficiency above all else—a reflec-

1 "Masterpieces of Nineteenth-Century Italian Painting from the Gaetano Marzotto Collection" opened at the National Academy of Design, New York, on April 20, 1995, and remains on view through June 11. It was previously seen at the Kimbell Museum of Art, Fort Worth (February 12–April 9, 1995), and will travel to the European Academy of Arts, London (June 22–August 20, 1995). A bilingual catalogue, with essays in Italian and in English translation, has been privately printed for the Marzotto Corporation and is available from the National Academy (287 pages, $40 paper).



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tion, perhaps, of a businessman's practicality—and the collection places a premium on competence gained through hard work.

Which is a praiseworthy attribute, but one that doesn't guarantee significant art or make the Marzotto Collection any less run-of-the-mill. Exhibitions rarely look bad in the reassuringly stodgy environs of the National Academy, and the Marzotto Collection is no exception. But neither does it sing out. A painter friend told me that he left the show with little more than an impression of artistic facility. And, sure enough, of the thirty-odd artists represented here, there's not a bum technician in the lot. Painting after painting, one is confronted with the product of "professionals." The work in the Marzotto Collection is both familiar and forgettable. That it operates at a high level of craftsmanship says something about academic standards in the nineteenth century. But anyone who knows their art history will already be wise to that.

Most of the paintings in the Marzotto Collection are innocuous enough, though even devotees of kitsch may have an arduous time lauding the virtues of Ettore Tito's saccharine tableaus. Sebastiano de Albertis's military scenes, with their straining horses and clouds of battleground dust, are initially stirring but their bluster quickly thins. Similarly, Antonio Mancini's portraits are those of a showman overly impressed with his own flash. The flickers of paint in *The Model* (1879), for example, don't read as light so much as tinsel strewn over the painting's surface. John Singer Sargent, upon seeing Mancini's paintings, proclaimed him "the greatest living painter," an intimation, perhaps, of the limitations of Sargent's own brand of painterly glitz.

Even so, academics can have their good days, and there are paintings here that have some zing to them. The crisp, jewel-like blues and reds of Alberto Pasini's "Orientalist" paintings are diverting, as is the languor of Domenico Morelli's *Turkish Baths* (1876–78), an image whose eroticism is sparked as much by its chiseled contours and hazy tonalities as by its subject. Possibly the strangest painting in the collection is Giovanni Fattori's *The Watch (The White Wall)* (*c.* 1871). An impossibly spare depiction of soldiers on horseback, *The Watch*, with its asymmetrical composition and geometric framework, is startlingly modern. That it was a popular painting in its own time offers proof, I suppose, that mass consensus is not always a dubious proposition. But these paintings are mild oddities in a collection that is, overall, of a piece and routine.

There is, as the cliché has it, an exception to every rule, and the Marzotto Collection includes one artist of stature. Prior to this exhibition, Giuseppe de Nittis (1846–1894) was unknown to me; he is, I believe, unknown to everyone but specialists in Italian art history. Which is unfortunate, because de Nittis is, as Tassi notes in his essay, "a painter's painter." He's the real thing. De Nittis died young, of a cerebral hemorrhage, at the age of thirty-eight. Yet in that brief time he accomplished something substantial, and his paintings steal a show much in need of being stolen. With thirty works on view, it might seem difficult for an artist *not* to stand out, but de Nittis's paintings take up little space. Most are small—averaging around 8 × 10"—and the best of them, *Towards the Mountain* (*c.* 1860), is not much bigger than a baseball card. De Nittis is the star of the exhibition because of the quality of his paintings, and it is these paintings that make the Marzotto Collection worth visiting.

De Nittis, like many of his Italian peers, traveled to France and was aware of the advanced painting of his time. Tassi quibbles with the importance of such contact, assuring us that these visits were "relatively brief and, as a result, of little effect." Yet, de Nittis settled in France in 1868. It is not too much of a stretch to presume that de Nittis's hobnobbing with Degas had a certain gainful impact on his painting.

De Nittis emerges from the Marzotto Collection as a figure worthy of attention. The feature of his paintings that will appeal most to the modern eye is his brushwork.



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In de Nittis's best work, his paint handling seems effortless, yet contributes to the structure of each painting. This is especially true in his landscapes and portraits. De Nittis's larger paintings, particularly the city views, however, are stilted. *Westminster* (1878), for instance, is a disjointed melding of atmospheric gradations of light—what we have come to think of, more or less, as Impressionism—with a more naturalistic depiction of figures on a bridge. Renoir vetoed its inclusion in the first Impressionist exhibition because he felt that it placed too much emphasis on narrative. He was right: the figures weigh *Westminster* down. It's a painting of two minds.

But not all of de Nittis's figurative paintings are marred by this attribute. The lovely *Tranquil Hour* (1874), an image of two women idly riding in a boat, is a masterly dotting and dashing of paint reminiscent of Monet. In *Portrait of the Journalist Martino Cafiero* (1872), a dexterous study of gesture and character, the title figure examines a painting—is it one of de Nittis's own?—with a cockiness that is not without a hint of comedy; on its own terms, it's a tour de force. De Nittis also had a knack for pastels and the two portraits on view here—particularly the creamy *Gaby* (1880–81)—evince a draftsman capable of capturing nuance without strain.

But it is de Nittis's small landscapes that are the most exceptional paintings in the Marzotto Collection, not in the least because they are, even now, so audacious. Here his paint handling achieves an ease so unfettered that its freshness can seem tossed off, sketchy. But they are, without question, fully realized paintings. Many of them are on panel, and de Nittis integrates the blonde tone of the wood with the image in a manner that avoids trickery. In *Vesuvian Landscape with Snow* (1871–72) and, especially, *The Slopes of Vesuvius III* (1871–72), de Nittis's definition of form is relegated to a few unerring strokes of paint; their subtlety is devastating.

Likewise, the aforementioned *Towards the Mountain* reads, at first, as nothing more than a blur of paint. Which, in a way, is exactly what it is, but it is also a rather exacting delineation of figures in a landscape. (The reproduction of it in the catalogue clarifies its imagery at the expense of making it a different painting altogether—evidence, as if we needed it, that reproductions are never to be trusted.) *Towards the Mountain*'s fusing of medium and illusion—what Richard Wollheim has called "twofoldness"—is a joy to behold, a bit of painterly magic that most artists only dream of.

*Towards the Mountain* is a minor masterpiece worthy of inclusion in the Impressionist canon, as may be—who knows?—de Nittis himself. Of course, unearthing unknown masters from the hurly burly of art history is a favorite (and irresistible) parlor game of historians, curators, dealers, and, yes, art critics. I doubt that de Nittis is such a master. In the context of the Marzotto Collection he shines; among his French peers he may be little more than an out-of-towner who made good. Then again, good artists should not be lightly dismissed, and a comprehensive exhibition of his work would be welcome. But until some institution—the National Academy in conjunction with the Marzotto Corporation, perhaps?—mounts such a show, the de Nittis paintings in the Marzotto Collection will have to suffice. And, for the time being, they do.

# Exhibition notes

"Nature Vivante:
The Still Lifes of John La Farge"
at the Jordan–Volpe Gallery,
New York. April 28–June 9, 1995

Most of us, if we think about John La Farge at all, are likely to regard him as rather an innocuous figure from America's genteel past. If we have been to Trinity Church, Boston, or to the Church of the Ascension, New York, we undoubtedly will have admired the fine murals he did for those institutions in the 1870s and 1880s. And if we have visited the Century Association in New



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York, someone is sure to have taken us aside and pointed out the extraordinary small oil of an intense, taut-faced young man, asking us who we think it is. Unless we were close enough to read the legend, we will shrug and admit we haven't a clue, and will be duly surprised to learn that it is a portrait of the nineteen-year-old Henry James, done in 1862 by his friend John La Farge.

In fact, La Farge (1835–1910) is one of those figures whom artistic fashion has unfairly consigned to the margins. He was not, it is true, a great innovator. But having been subjected to a century of ceaseless innovation—much of which has come more and more to look like "innovation"—we are perhaps ready to acknowledge other virtues in our artists. And other virtues La Farge had in abundance. In a letter, Henry James praised his friend as "a strange and complicated product"—strangeness and complication being eminent Jamesian qualities—and, writing in *The Atlantic* in 1874, he lavished a quantity of Jamesian judiciousness and discrimination on some still lifes that La Farge had recently exhibited.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted a retrospective of La Farge's work in 1936. But this collection of thirty-five still lifes at the Jordan–Volpe Gallery is apparently the first exhibition to be devoted entirely to this once-popular side of the artist's *oeuvre*. La Farge began painting floral still lifes in earnest in 1859 when he went to Newport, Rhode Island, to study with William Morris Hunt. (A stint in Paris studying with Thomas Couture a few years earlier had already equipped him with impressive technical skills.) He painted many still lifes of flowers, mostly in oil, in the 1860s, and then, after a hiatus of a decade or more, returned to the genre with a somewhat lighter palette and a preference for watercolor. The works on view at Jordan–Volpe, which are drawn from various public and private collections, are split about evenly between the earlier oils and the later watercolors.

Like many artists of his time, La Farge absorbed a promiscuous range of influences including the academic studies of France's premier painter of flowers, Fantin-Latour (1836–1904), Pre-Raphaelite painting, and Japanese prints. While they do not possess the mystery of Chardin's still lifes, La Farge's efforts are invariably accomplished and charming, and are occasionally lusciously seductive. Some of the paintings that were most famous in La Farge's day—*Agathon to Erosanthe* (1861) and *Wreath of Flowers* (1866), for example—are likely to strike most contemporary viewers as a bit cloying and pretentious. Among other things, they show that the association between flowers and transitoriness can be overdone. But many of La Farge's more modest pictures are breathtaking. Almost all display formidable technical accomplishment, and some of the watercolors are *tours de force* of delicacy and suggestiveness. Indeed, although La Farge was a skilled draftsman, his ambition to paint "'the' water lily not 'a' water lily" generally led him to sacrifice exact botanical delineation in favor of visual innuendo and adumbration. In this context, James L. Yarnall, director of the La Farge catalogue raisonné, writes that La Farge strove to paint "without servile naturalistic goals." It would not have earned John Ruskin's seal of approval, but La Farge's emancipation from strict naturalism did result in some hauntingly beautiful paintings, and we must be grateful to the Jordan–Volpe Gallery for making them accessible.

The catalogue for the exhibition, written by Mr. Yarnall, has been published by the Jordan–Volpe Gallery (161 pages, $50 paper).

*—Roger Kimball*

## "Nadar"
at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York. April 14–July 9, 1995

The early masters of photography were all voluntary recruits from other artistic, intellectual, or technical pursuits. William Henry Fox Talbot, for example, was one of those Victorian high achievers who won distinction as a scientist, mathematician, folklorist, and translator of ancient languages, and



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also managed to get himself elected to a seat in Parliament. Gaspard-Félix Tournachon (1820–1910), who has found a permanent place in history as the photographer Nadar, was a generation younger than Fox Talbot and came from an equally legendary but very different milieu—the world of destitute artists and writers that Henri Murger romanticized in his *Scenes of Bohemian Life* and that Giacomo Puccini mythologized in *La Bohème*. He, too, was remarkably versatile in his interests and talents—a journalist, critic, novelist, caricaturist, early amateur of aeronautical travel, and pioneer practitioner of aerial photography, as well as a radical political activist and inventor, having envisioned a primitive version of the helicopter and the concept of the phonograph. Like Fox Talbot's, however, Nadar's principal claim on our attention now rests upon his photographic achievement.

In photography, too, Nadar was remarkably versatile in his range of interests. In the current retrospective at the Met—the first comprehensive survey of Nadar's photography to be seen in an American museum—there are examples of both his explorations of aerial photography and his more macabre pictorial subjects—not only glimpses of the Paris catacombs and sewers but the pictures of hermaphrodites that were made, it seems, for "scientific," or medical, purposes. Yet it is, above all, as a portrait photographer who set out to portray the artistic eminences of his time that Nadar created his most important work.

It was not as a photographer, however, but as a lithographer and caricaturist that Nadar had first embarked upon his mission to create a "pantheon" of the talents of his own epoch. Thus in the current exhibition the extraordinary lithograph entitled *Panthéon Nadar* (1854), depicting some 250 authors, serves as an instructive prologue to the assembly of photographic portraits, which, though fewer in number, are of far greater artistic and documentary interest. For in the photographic medium Nadar moved beyond caricature into a penetrating exploration of character, and thus fixed for posterity the images that we still carry in our minds of some of the greatest figures of a great period.

It must not be assumed that these portraits are in any sense "objective," or detached, depictions of their subjects. Nadar looked upon the artists and writers of his time as heroic figures, and so portrayed them in his pictures. And even among the subjects he admired, he had his favorites. His politics inclined him to depict the radical historian Jules Michelet, for example, as a benevolent sage, and his immense sympathy for Hector Berlioz prompted him to transform the composer's unprepossessing physique into an image of monumental nobility. In this respect, as in others, Nadar carried into the medium of photography a convention already well established by the leading portrait painters of his period.

Still, though he was generally inclined to flatter his subjects—as we can see in his portraits of Daumier, Doré, Dumas *père*, Rossini, and George Sand—he refused to falsify the more difficult characters who sat for him. The portrait of Delacroix is appropriately dour and magisterial, and those of Baudelaire are anything but benign. He was particularly responsive to the moods of the women he photographed, and not at all averse to signaling their capacity to cause him trouble—as in the candid portrait of his young wife. In the series of pictures he devoted to the mime Jean-Charles Deburau in the role of Pierrot, moreover, he created a series of portraits that went beyond portraiture to produce something akin to modern advertising photography—pictures that are at once highly entertaining and promotional.

Nadar was a true original—as André Rouillé writes in the excellent catalogue accompanying the exhibition: "not just an admirer of his age," but "one of its chief actors, one of its heroes, one of its pioneers"—and this superb exhibition does him justice at last.

—*Hilton Kramer*



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Dance

# ABT's ebb & Twyla Tharp's flow

*by Laura Jacobs*

In *Ballet*, the new Frederick Wiseman film that documents a season with American Ballet Theatre, the most memorable character is the moon. Coming out of the ABT studios after a long day of leg warmers and pliés and visits to the company chiropractor, the camera lifts past the Manhattan twilight and settles on that big round monosyllable in the sky. Later, when the company goes on tour to Europe, Wiseman's camera wanders habitually upward, more solemn sighing on those oh-so-silent moons. It's a theme, a motif, but so static that the viewer is likewise stunned into slow wit: what does it *mean*? Perhaps Wiseman wants to punctuate the seasonal rhythms of the company, or to suggest the nocturnal performance life of dance. In the end, *Ballet* just looks bovine—the mooooo-n.

And that's pretty much how ABT comes off, too. We never see the entire artistic enterprise interlock, the sheer muscular reverberation of the company in a big corps-de-ballet scene. We never see temperament or ambition or relationships or spark. Rather, Wiseman focuses on a few placid principals and the odd soloist, showing them in rehearsal with coaches (who give the film's most spirited performances). He also lets us see administrators pushing pencils behind their desks. When the company gets to Europe, the ranks look so straggly and sparse you'd think these were survivors of some battle. And with the rocks and ruins of Athens rising up behind the ancient outdoor stage, the documentary begins to look like a biblical epic that couldn't afford crowd scenes, so instead goes heavy on the dungeon: dancers wait around in glum hallways, stretching their spines on invisible racks.

Well, there's some truth to the metaphor. *Ballet* was shot during the financially dire years under Jane Hermann's artistic direction, when ABT *was* embattled, still bruised over Mikhail Baryshnikov's haughty departure from the top spot. The new artistic director, former ABT principal Kevin McKenzie, came into a company demoralized by a lack of funds and faith. For a quick shot in the arm, one of the first things he did was to grab the twenty-minute title ballet from 1993's failed Broadway musical *The Red Shoes* and slip it into repertory. The 1948 Powell and Pressburger film, which spread a worldwide scarlet fever for ballet, was an association ABT couldn't afford not to make, even though the dance itself was little more than a lively trifle. (New York City Ballet got a piece of the action too: it booked the Broadway ballerina Margaret Illmann as a guest artist.)

Classical dance could use another film phenomenon like *The Red Shoes*, its deep dyes and spellbound storytelling a brilliant articulation of the erotic energy that binds artist to art. The film was, for many viewers, an unforgettable consummation. *Ballet*, however, dropped out of sight after two weeks at New York's Film Forum. And no wonder. Wiseman's film is the polar opposite



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of Powell and Pressburger's; his imperative seems to have been No Overstatement. Where *The Red Shoes* revels in hot and saturated color, *Ballet* is cool, grainy, as if color footage were aging before our eyes, trying to pass as black-and-white. Where *The Red Shoes* is a film about choices, Faustian bargains, and competing passions, *Ballet* offers a kinder, gentler company in which voices aren't raised—aren't even voiced—and dancers pad asexually hither and yon on little cat feet (no bleeding toes here). As for that moon, well, *The Red Shoes* chooses the sun as its complicit counterpoint, for it is daylight these dancers lose in their pursuit of theater's interior world. When they go outside, they hide behind sunglasses, or squint in the face of Apollonian might. *The Red Shoes* is blazing, *Ballet* is bled out.

Unfortunately, and probably unwittingly, Wiseman has documented something true. American Ballet Theatre is staring into the same grammatical void as every other ballet company in the world: the future-tense where classical choreographers should be. New ballets are the life blood of the classical company, as necessary a formative experience for dancers as a diet of daily barre and nineteenth-century classics and Balanchine. And yet, except for the work of James Kudelka, who offers up his ballet background like a thorn in his paw, every première that's come recently into ABT repertory is from a choreographer whose coin is contemporary or *avant-garde* dance. Lar Lubovitch, Twyla Tharp—each can claim knowledge of the classical vocabulary, but neither is as ballet-steeped as, say, Irina Kolpakova or Michael Somes, *Red Shoes*-generation coaches who, along with the moon, steal the show in *Ballet*, creating energized space and heightened emotion with the simplest of gestures, showing the extravagance of a direct line. There were moments when these two looked upon their charges with pity.

Which is not an inappropriate response upon seeing ABT's dancers in these new works. Lar Lubovitch's work for the Broadway *Red Shoes* was full of inside quips and classical quotations that, within the context of Jule Styne's disastrously flat-footed musical, brought a measure of wit and texture to the stage. More typical is Lubovitch's recent première at ABT, *A Brahms Symphony*. The dance is a long-winded, bare-foot exercise in Flow, in Sweep, in Sinuous Symmetry, as if there were a giant, puff-cheeked genie in the wings blowing groups of dancers due north and south. It's the kind of large-scale, abstract mass—with hints of fate of course—that never authenticates itself, never reaches a moment that had to be just as it was, and couldn't have worked twenty other ways. Who were the dancers? Without the program you'd never know. You don't need to know.

James Kudelka, who has a new ballet making its première later this season, at least puts the dancers in toe shoes. He has an almost overwhelming sense of what came before, which gives us a line on how to read him. His hero might be late Antony Tudor—the Tudor who had pared away plot, transcended into sensibility—and his hit from last year, *Cruel World*, is a trip to Tudor's Edwardian England, complete with bulging bags of repressed emotion (stiffened hips, hands latched to cameoed throat). In *Cruel World*, Kudelka uses Tchaikovsky in much the same way Lubovitch uses Brahms, as a heaving force that might crush the dancers were they not to keep moving. And yet Kudelka's ear is nuanced, his sense of time and place, specific. I like the way he poses the men to suggest dark chapels and spiked wrought-iron fences, and then sends the women to pray and suffer among them. You can see that the dancers are committed to his commitment. What holds Kudelka back is the rhetorical sameness of his dance phrases, and the structural problem of too much mirrored group movement (the unending curse of "abstract" ballet). The women are so overpartnered—incessently handled, lifted, and twirled by the men—that it makes one overanxious, as if Kudelka wouldn't know what to do with them if he let them go. He is trying to speak with ballet's vocabulary but all he has are tortured verbs, a fancier



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version of Sweep and Flow—a furrowed highbrow.

Twyla Tharp's personal odyssey continues, a choreographic journey that traverses ballet and modern troupes alike. I'm not sure I could count her stints at ABT, though we all remember the first, her breathtaking collaboration with Baryshnikov, a symbiotic relationship that served both so well—fulfilling his need for subversive technical challenges, her need for a superstud alter ego. Tharp's continuing inability to fill the gap left by Misha is less crucial than her inability to frame a woman dancer with some semblance of interest. From gig to gig she goes, making brash, bursting, elegant movement for the men, while tossing bourrées to the women, or asking them for weird wiggles and skateboard slides on pointe. It makes sense that the best dance Tharp's choreographed in recent years, 1992's *Demeter and Persephone*, was for the Martha Graham Dance Company, a troupe whose women are off-pointe and consequently without a built-in techni-poetic difference.

Honoring her thirtieth anniversary as a choreographer, ABT invited Tharp to present an evening of premières at its May 1 gala. She returns to the company with a new man in her life, though I wouldn't mention him if she didn't keep coyly using every chance not quite to say who he is. He is the literary editor of *The New Republic*, a balletomane who drops *Concerto Barocco* into his "Washington Diarist" columns. As Martha Graham had Louis Horst and then her Harvard-guy Erick Hawkins, so Twyla had Mikhail Baryshnikov and now her Harvard-guy Leon Wieseltier. It's a match made in Mensa (he's acknowledged in the program as an unofficial musical advisor). As for the choreographer's heart, the notoriously difficult Tharp has been positively goo-goo lately. Noting the change in her nature, a *New York Times* "Arts & Leisure" preview referred to her as "Twyla the Good." What filled the stage on gala night, however, was not.

Sweep has never been a Tharp dynamic but Flow is. Her work has always been distinguished by its fluid feel, the tumbling momentums and silvered swiftness, the slithery jazz softness in the knees, the salmon-spawn leaps and punches against hard air. Perhaps no choreographer has demanded of the corps the split-second directional shifts that Tharp has, making them an ocean school of flashing instincts. Her work with Misha was a white-water hydraulic system—he powered the town, kept the lights burning. For Tharp, "flow" wasn't just movement, it was also a state, the Seventies version of what we in the self-contained Nineties call "zone": sensate presence, channeled energy, the reflexes of the prizefighter. Tharp has always been more at home in the four-sided fight ring than in ballet's square studio; for her, bouncing off the ropes was a better strategy than seeking herself in a mirror. She found Flow in fight.

But aggression is tiring, and its returns diminish. *In the Upper Room*, Tharp's late-Eighties trance dance to Philip Glass, embodied the problem. In a haunted, jailhouse fog, half the dancers wear running shoes, bobbing and jabbing like contenders; the others shoot through on stiff pointes—*crimson pointes* that are as menacing as talons in a cockfight. It's a no-exit runaround, a puzzle over the best way out of the fog, a game of escape that ends with everyone in exhilarated but trapped opacity. Last year, a work Tharp choreographed for Boston Ballet built a bridge. *Waterbaby Bagatelles* (again, men like marlins and women as distant ondines) looked as though it picked up where Tharp's apocalyptic *Golden Section* left off—in fiery mid-leap. *Waterbaby*'s dancers seem to land in blue neon space, filling their lungs with—what?—air, light, life, death. Tharp, who recently said she's entering "the beginning of the last chapter," is aiming for unnameable zones, upper rooms, the existential aeries of a poet like Emily Dickinson, whose writing inspired the title of Tharp's new dance to Britten. (Another dance was airily titled *On the Wing*, then changed last-minute to *Jump Start*.)

"From Blank to Blank! A Threadless Way/ I pushed Mechanic feet!—" That's Emily,



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too. These new dances for ABT show Tharp working with the tinniest kinetic flash, the oldest tricks, and dramatic instincts so thin they might be caricature. *Americans We*, a ballet set to nineteenth-century American songs, was less a mature work by Tharp than a trot through the Americana of other choreographers, a pastiche annoying in how quickly it called to mind bits from Robbins's repertory, as well as devices from Balanchine's state-of-the-union ballets and Paul Taylor's mortal romps. As always, Tharp has fun with the military men, giving Johan Renvall some fine chesty moments in the air (though it's still a Misha *manqué*). What's more disturbing is the way Tharp references her own ballets, using Susan Jaffe as a self-quote, floating her through inappropriate moments in a tutu so that we say "Ah ha! The ballet girl from *Deuce Coupe*."

The more ambitious piece came next, prepared for by the deaths in *Americans We* and wearing its height in its title, *How Near Heaven*. Set to a mysterious, youthfully yearning composition by Benjamin Britten, his *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, this ten-part piece pulls two female principals into high relief against a corps of men and women. Gianni Versace's palette of ivory, black, and aqua satin is night-smart (though his bias-design gowns distort the women's line and add weight). The black backdrop grows starry, a funeral takes place, and a cortège delivers an invisible body upward. There is also a celestial pot-party with a slow-motion run-through of popular dance that may or may not be steps taken from earlier Tharp dances (it's as if Twyla's making up for those lost looks in the mirror). *How Near Heaven* begs questions like: why two ballerinas, and where are we? Logic of course, needn't enter into it. We look for verbal answers because Tharp doesn't give us any dance ones. The women's pointe work is perfunctory and inexpressive, and a perfunctory, inexpressive approach to stage space—"A Threadless Way"—is the consequence. Except for obvious Tharp asterisks, this could be anyone's "profound" ballet.

A Tharp pointe has no personality. I am not the first to note that Tharp's use of the toe shoe is largely monolithic, respectful but not really intrigued. She treats it more as a stiletto, a leg extender, than as the strange, thin-skinned, pink-throated, warm and winged thing it is. Still, I can see how a choreographer might come to resent those sheathed feet. The rise from flat foot to pointe is a complex act. First, it is a physical fact, a lift in the breastbone and hips, followed by the metatarsals. It is also a rise to emotion, into the ether of feeling. And it is escape, to the nether worlds of history, into the fancies of imagination. The pointe asks for understanding; in gratitude it leads classical choreographers to new lands, new scapes onstage.

Jerome Robbins made such a pilgrimage last spring, when he choreographed a little piece for the School of American Ballet's annual Workshop Performances. Called *Two & Three Part Inventions*, it entered New York City Ballet repertory this season and is the best ballet Robbins has done in over a decade. In this dance conceived for eight students, Robbins severely limited the range of his vocabulary, and paid express attention to the pointe, working the young foot the way Bach's Inventions work the young hand, finding a correspondence, a corridor, between these essential levers of creation —ten fingers, ten toes. Robbins's dance takes place on a sunny stage, but its concentration, its chastity, make one think of ritual, a group dance under moonlight. And when in a solo the dewy, dark-haired Jenifer Ringer takes feathery steps away from the audience, her hands rising in front of her as if to frame a small vision—the gestural equivalent of a Shakespearean "now soft"—the heart hushes too, not knowing what she sees, but rewarded anyway by the bliss of her seeing.



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Theater

# Tony or bust!

*by Mark Steyn*

In every theater producer, hope springs eternal. But, on Broadway, theater producers hope spring's eternal. In April and early May, the wide open spaces of the schedule are suddenly invaded by an expeditionary force of new plays. Why? Not because the lifting of winter causes a sudden rush of New Yorkers to the box office, but because of the finely calculated formula on which theatrical success is deemed to rest. If you open *just* before the Tony cut-off date in early May, you only have to keep running until the award nominations are announced. After that, with a clutch of Tony nominations under your belt, you only have to keep running until the ceremony in early June. After that, with a clutch of Tony Awards under your belt, you'll run forever. QED. Quite Extraordinarily Deranged.

The cut-off this year was midnight, Tuesday, May 2. Conventional wisdom says: you'd have to be nuts to open after May 2, so nothing's scheduled now until October. Instead, says conventional wisdom, do what *My Thing of Love* did. This play made it with a couple of hours to spare, having sacrificed during previews both its director and two-thirds of the cast—all just to scrape in on May 2 and thus make the Tony eligibility period. On Wednesday, it woke up to stinko reviews; the following Monday, it was frozen out by the Tonys; on Sunday, it was gone. Within days, the Tony deadline forms a line of the dead: Monday, you're *On the Waterfront*; Saturday, you're consigned to Davy Jones's locker, still mumbling as you go under that you coulda binna contenduh.

*My Thing of Love* wasn't a bunch of snake-oil salesmen taking a flier on a rackety star vehicle. It was a vast accumulation of legit muscle: a Steppenwolf play from Chicago, packaged by the Weisslers (producers of the James Earl Jones *Othello*, the Judith Anderson *Medea*, the Joel Grey *Cabaret*, the Tyne Daly *Gypsy*, the Brooke Shields *Grease!*) and Pace Theatricals (the biggest power on the road) and Jujamcyn (New York's third-largest theater group). For all these hotshots, midnight, Tuesday, May 2 became the only consideration. It's not that there's no evidence that anything other than Best Play, Musical, or Actor awards make any difference at the box office—though there isn't. It's not that, even if nominated, the play would have stood no chance against *Arcadia* or *Indiscretions* or *Love! Valour! Compassion!* or its sitcom star against Eileen Atkins or Cherry Jones or Helen Mirren—though they wouldn't. It's not that, in atonement for a year of crass huckstering, Broadway demands that its Best Play have at least a veneer of serious purpose—though it does. The reason that shooting for May 2 makes no sense is that, as much as anyone else on Broadway, the Tony nominating committee likes what it's already been told is good. So, just like everyone else, it likes *Arcadia* and *Indiscretions*, Glenn Close and Ralph Fiennes and the guy who sings "Ol' Man River" in *Show Boat*; it doesn't *make* hits, it only con-



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firms them. This is now the New York theater's only distinguishing characteristic. In fine art and contemporary dance, a handful of arbiters pass judgment and their audiences fall into line; in rock and movies, the vox populi rules and the critics scramble along behind trying to fit some theory and order to the whims of the mob. The theater, uniquely, is a three-legged tango of the terrified.

In art and pop, the emperor may have no clothes, but by God he's still prepared to bluff it out. The theater totters around sheepishly like a fellow who knows he's dancing in his underwear. Everyone wants to be told what to think. At one end, there's the producer: these days, the likelihood is that play producing will not be his principal area of expertise (like the Kroc sisters, makers of the revolutionary Epilady hair-removal device, who a couple of seasons back produced *Meet Me in St. Louis*, the world's first fully depilated musical), so he's genuinely curious to find out from *The New York Times* whether it's any good or not—and, if not, he can close it the following night ("fold" is the perfect term for such spinelessness). At the other end, there's the audience: theatergoing is such a physically uncomfortable experience—from booking the tickets to being herded up the escalators of the Minskoff or the Gershwin, as depressing as a neglected terminal at Newark but without any Broadway show ads to relieve the drab beige and with worse concession carts charging thrice the price for warm soda in a plastic beaker . . . where was I? Oh, yes. In such circumstances, it's doubtful whether anything approximating a genuine "good time" is possible, so what counts is the prestige attached to both the event and your admission to it (the shrewdest marketing slogan ever was "See *Les Misérables*—because you've waited long enough!"). Unfortunately, the system has broken down since the retirement of Frank Rich. Say what you like about Frank, he may not know much about art but he knew what he didn't like. His successors have been as craven as both the producers and the customers: reading between the lines, you could tell David Richards didn't much enjoy *Show Boat* or Vincent Canby the new Neil Simon, but they were too scared to say so. As a result, both showmen and readers are baffled: the reviews aren't bad enough to justify closing the play, but they're not good enough to make it worth booking tickets, either. The fragile theater/press/audience relationship has deteriorated into a game of pass-the-buck among three spinster rabbits of delicate constitution.

Partly in consequence, the Tonys came up short this year in several key categories. Andrew Lloyd Webber, Don Black, and Christopher Hampton won Best Score and Best Book for *Sunset Boulevard* without any other nominees. As things look unlikely to improve in these areas in the foreseeable future, the Tonys ought perhaps to consider introducing new categories for which there'd be some genuine competition. I'd like to suggest Most Producers Per Performance, though *On the Waterfront* set a record which may prove hard to beat: for a week's run, it required fourteen above-the-title producers plus nine associate producers—that's bigger than the cast of most musicals.

In my experience, most theater producers are cheerfully ignorant of motion pictures. Lucky them, you scoff. True. But that makes them unlikely to be the best judges of which proven hit titles to buy in from Hollywood. Theater is so shamelessly parasitic of motion pictures now, we forget that not so long ago it was the other way round, that smart, ambitious movies wanted to deflect a little of the style and dignity, the kudos of legit. You don't have to look further than *On the Waterfront*: Budd Schulberg may be pure Hollywood, but in those days Hollywood knew that a serious, credible drama about blue-collar corruption called for Marlon Brando, Lee J. Cobb, Elia Kazan, Leonard Bernstein—guys with, in 1954, heavyweight legit credentials. The stylized naturalism, the symphonic score, the whole tone of the movie aspires to the grandeur of theater.



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Forty years on, I'd like to ask those twenty-three producers and their associates why, when they optioned Schulberg's script, they thought they were getting *On the Waterfront*? In what sense is it Schulberg's *On the Waterfront*? If we're going to get proprietorial, you could make as strong a case for Kazan's *On the Waterfront* or Bernstein's *On the Waterfront* or Brando's or Cobb's or even Karl Malden's or Eva Marie Saint's. Without these participants, you're left with a lean, efficient screenplay, poorly updated and, thanks to an indifferent cast and a director who departed before opening, beached on a vast stage it couldn't possibly hope to fill. So: only a posthumous Tony for Most Producers Per Performance—and let's hope all twenty-three don't make a speech.

The award for Most Inaccurate Playbill goes to *My Thing of Love*. By opening night, two of the six characters listed had been written out, the second female lead had been replaced a few days earlier, the director had gone and the feature interview led with a color picture of a leading man who'd already jumped ship. What's left is a bleak view of a suburban marriage in five scenes with four actors and two sets. It's Alexandra Gersten's first play, commissioned by Steppenwolf in Chicago and the winner of the Joseph Jefferson Award for the Best New Work of 1992. So much for commissions and prizes.

*My Thing of Love* is so sitcom-derivative it's like a karaoke night for wannabe dramatists. It's peppered with glib gags and put-downs that seem mechanical at the time and, in the cold gray light of the morning after, just plain desperate; to pluck from my notes at random, "Something really bad is going to happen to your penis" and "Has anyone ever told you you look like Edna St. Vincent Millay?" The devices take the exaggerated shortcuts of TV plots: we're asked to sympathize with the girl because her late brother stepped into an elevator shaft. At least, when this gimmick was used on "L.A. Law" and "Newhart," they showed it to us, instead of just talking about it afterward. The set's from a sitcom—a fitted kitchen that looks as if it's never been used—and, in the little gaps between scenes, you half-expect commercials.

What qualifies it as theater is the inelegant title, which Miss Gersten never attempts to prove—sitcoms to their credit prefer the commendably straightforward nomenclature of "Roseanne" and "The Dick Van Dyke Show"—and arbitrary lurches into despairing lines like "Can anyone stop, look, and listen in a way that has some hope, that has some consequence?" As the betrayed wife, Laurie Metcalf underlines the more portentous dialogue with strangulated facial gestures and emphatic hand movements that sometimes make it look as if she's doing simultaneous signing for the deaf. Miss Metcalf, incidentally, plays Jackie on "Roseanne": the trouble with sitcom-like plays is that theater will never be able to command the star, only the star's sister. Besides, the operative word in "couch potato" is "couch"; you don't have to leave home and pay fifty bucks for it, so who'd want to be an orchestra-seat potato? It's worth noting that the most successful theatrical form of recent years is purely theatrical to the extent that it can only function in a legitimate theater: if you did *Cats* on TV or *Phantom* as a movie, you'd be laughed off the screen. If they could only shake off their electronic envy for a moment, there's a lesson there for playwrights, too.

When Miss Metcalf threatens that something really bad is going to happen to your penis, I found myself thinking: like what? It gets cast as understudy in a bus-and-truck production of *Love! Valour! Compassion!*? For the first time in Tony history, all four nominees for Best Featured Actor in a Play—three from *Love! Valour!* plus Jude Law from *Indiscretions*—were shortlisted (so to speak) for performances in which they revealed their manhood. Indeed, although no critic chose to comment on it, on both occasions that I've seen *Love! Valour!* the departing audience discussed one actor's performance only in terms of his, ah, striking endowment. The stage is awash in members during this scene but his is the one



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that all eyes follow: it is the Eileen Atkins of penises, or anyway the Carol Channing. As male nudity seems to be the only kind you get on Broadway these days, perhaps the trend should be formally recognized by converting the Best Actor category to Best Part in a Play.

Jude Law's gets the second-act opener in *Indiscretions*. We are in a sparsely-furnished Paris bedsit in the 1940s alone with Madeleine—or so we think. But then, from the clawfoot tub at the back of the room, a spiky blonde hairdo pops up followed by the rest of Jude Law's dripping form. Whenever I've bathed in Paris bedsits, I usually find the lack of both hot water and central heating has one bolting hastily for a full set of clothes. But Law emerges from the bath, selects a towel the size of a handkerchief and takes longer to dry himself than the title song of *Hello, Dolly!* Well, na na na na na na na, hey, Jude.

Needless to say, the penis is not in Jean Cocteau's original play. But the director, Sean Mathias, is a great one for bringing out the homoerotic subtext—if you gave him "Ozzie and Harriet," he'd bring out the homoerotic subtext—and, even when there's no homoerotic subtext to bring out, Mathias feels the next best thing he can do is put the cock in Cocteau. This is a stager who likes bold gestures. His last London hit, a revival of *Design for Living*, turned a brittle and subtle Coward play into a bisexual romp—strong on design, but never quite living. The same tendency to coarsen and cartoon is in evidence at the Ethel Barrymore. We should excuse him the dumb-and-dumber title, the fault of American producers who feared that the original French, *Les Parents terribles*, might prove harmful to the play's commercial prospects: after all, look at the way it's restricted the appeal of *Les Misérables*. Personally, I'd have abbreviated it to *Les Terribles* and attempted to pass it off as a sequel ("Les is back! And this time he's *terrible*!"), rather than paste an empty abstract generality over it.

Here's another Tony category, for *Indiscretions* and *My Thing of Love*: Worst Title. "Roseanne" and "Lucy" are, after all, following in the respectable tradition of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*: be specific, and leave the audience to figure out the universal theme. *Les Parents terribles* is what the play is. The peg is routine boy-meets-girl, but the relationship becomes a proxy through which the boy's family fight other, older battles: the mother loves the son too much to let him go; the father is conducting his own affair with the girlfriend; the maiden aunt, who pays the bills, lost the father to her sister long ago but now sees a way to get him back.

Cocteau described the play as both drama and comedy with aspects of a vaudeville act. Accidentally or otherwise, Mathias seems to have separated the elements and allocated them one apiece to each of the grown-ups. As George, Roger Rees comes on in goggles and uniform, the mad inventor in a Monty Python sketch. As Aunt Leo, Eileen Atkins is as taut as her bearing and as arch as her eyebrows. For drama, we have Kathleen Turner, who wears a fright wig and a Tennessee Williams dressing gown, as befits someone whose stage acting has always depended on the kindness of strangers. She doesn't get it here: with increasing ferocity, Rees wrestles every scene to the ground as if he'd like to throw it in the trunk of his car and break for the border; and Miss Atkins, with her usual stellar stillness, just sucks the life out of anyone else who happens to be onstage at the same time. The actors push the characters to such extremes you can't believe they're from the same planet, never mind the same family. Kathleen Turner and Eileen Atkins *sisters*? (Miss Turner, the only cast member un-nominated by the Tonys, obliquely underlined the problem with a pointed tribute to her stage-sibling: "I'm delighted that I don't have to compete against Eileen. She's put in *years* on Broadway. I've got a lot more time.") However, Cocteau—remember him?—is making a point about class, about families with too much money and nothing to do, and their inevitable tendency to self-indulgence, shallowness, selfishness. How sad that the



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Broadway première of the play is itself characterized by self-indulgence, shallowness, selfishness, etc.

Mathias's designer, Stephen Brimson Lewis, signals the tone. There are two sets: one—the mother's bedroom—is gloomy and hopelessly cluttered; the other—the girl's flat—is gleaming white and almost bare; both strike such smug poses that I'm surprised they don't announce themselves with trumpets—ta-*da*! The immaturity of the adults is meant to contrast with the young lovers, but Mathias can't resist bouncing every character off trampolines: when he's not preening and toweling and dangling his penis, Jude Law, a punk Tigger, is jumping around the bed wrapped in a sheet and sticking his tongue down his mother's throat: whatever happened to *suppressed* eroticism? Cynthia Nixon, as Madeleine, is comparatively demure but even she's forced to start clambering up the outer rails of a spiral staircase placed in the middle of the set merely for that purpose. In the gaps between the flashy party pieces, the play disappears, and the tragedy of the final scene, instead of rising inexorably from the dramatic heat, seems a maudlin wallow awkwardly grafted on to a larky diversion.

The best first act off-Broadway is *Sylvia* at the Manhattan Theatre Club. Charles Kimbrough, prosperous and complacent, returns to his apartment with Sarah Jessica Parker, young and grungey in shaggy sweater and shaggy blonde perm. She bounds around the stage and goes "Heyheyhey! Heyhey!" a lot. In a Sean Mathias production, this would be the behavior of a shy piano teacher or maybe an elderly nun. But *Sylvia* is an A. R. Gurney play and, in Gurney's world of WASPy manners, people hardly move, never mind bound; in his most successful play, *Love Letters*, they just sit down and read at us for two hours. Clearly, this is no ordinary Gurney character, and so it proves. Who is Sylvia? What is she? Sylvia (Miss Parker) is a dog. A stray wandering in the park, she has been taken in by Kimbrough. Or, rather, he's been taken in by her. "I wish I knew more about your former owner," he sighs. She says, "Second owners always want to know that."

Like *Infidelities*, *Sylvia* is concerned with sexual jealousy, but Gurney has chosen the comparatively neglected triangle of man, wife, poodle. Yes, back at the Cocteau, Jude Law's character is a poodle, but it's just a question of whose—his mummy's or his girlfriend's. Miss Parker is a more subversive poodle, distracting her middle-aged master from his job and his wife and eventually threatening their marriage. John Tillinger's production is disarmingly direct: you accept the convention of a talking dog played by an attractive blonde, and then the play just gets on with it. Besides, Gurney's predisposition to WASP restraint holds so strong that shtick that would pass unnoticed in *Infidelities* seems incredibly daring here.

If there was an award for Best Musical Performance by a Dog, Sylvia would be a shoo-in—especially since Sandy the dog pulled out of the cast album of *Annie Warbucks* after his agent demanded more money and threatened to take the producers to court (true). Here, Kimbrough is at the airport, being waved on to a business trip by his wife, Blythe Danner. Sylvia is curled up on the sofa, and softly starts to sing:

> Ev'ry time we say goodbye
> I die a little . . .

At the airport, husband and wife also have a go, taking up the song with an unaffected, understated charm. It's the sort of moment that could go horribly wrong—introducing halfway through the first act of a straight play a completely different dramatic vocabulary—but instead Gurney and Tillinger and their fine cast compress all the wistful delusion of romance into one beguiling, surreal trio. Never is the play so full of promise as at this point.

As the first act ends, Sylvia has tightened the leash on her master and the wife is on her hands and knees head-to-head with the dog and vowing to fight for her man. This is oddly reminiscent of Robin Maugham's *The*



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*Servant*, where a calculating valet insinuates his way into the household and enslaves his employer. I suppose these days, what with the shortage of servants, it's more likely to happen with pets, and I was looking forward to how Gurney would resolve the situation. But the second act settles down to shrink jokes and mistress jokes and goes nowhere. A pity.

With the long summer yearning lazily ahead like Sylvia on the couch, a word for the unobtrusive hit of the season. Adapted from *Washington Square*, *The Heiress* is one of those good-enough plays from Broadway's back catalogue that was all but forgotten. In the Forties, the producers insisted on a happy ending, so the authors, Ruth and Augustus Goetz, obliged and it promptly flopped. Naturally. With the restoration of the ending required by the drama, it ran a year. When the present revival snuck into the Cort, it had a non-starry cast, a non-superstar stager, and non-exhibitionist sets. But the sets serve the drama better than *Show Boat*'s, the director understands his play better than Sean Mathias, and the cast, unlike Laurie Metcalf & co., convince you that these characters live and breathe. It had nothing going for it other than the fact that it works, that it found an audience and that the audience enjoyed it enough to tell their friends. A tip to the fourteen producers of *On the Waterfront*: that's the way to do it.

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The media

# Amerika revisited

*by James Bowman*

Significance! What a temptation to a journalist!

Of course it was very sad about all those people being killed. Especially the children. But there was no sense just letting their deaths go to waste, was there? If some significance could be derived from the tragedy which would boost progressivism and check resurgent conservatism, then why not derive it? It wasn't as if the other side—mean-spirited, Nazi barbarians that they were—did not richly deserve to have the bombing pinned on them. The forces of political darkness have an undeniable affinity one with another; evil is a seamless garment. The right wing's bizarre attachment to guns and paramilitary apparatus was sufficient evidence of their implication in child murder.

So must have thought some significant portion of the punditry, that unnatural flock of carrion crows, as they surveyed the feast laid before them by the Oklahoma bombers. I wonder if they would have yielded to the temptation even if they had not been given the news hook supplied by the president's denunciation of the "loud and angry voices" in our national political debate which "spread hate" and "leave the impression, by their very words, that violence is acceptable"? Perhaps not. But so low has the level of public discourse sunk in America that Jonathan Alter, writing in *Newsweek*, cannot even see anything wrong with making political capital out of tragedy:

> Let's assume that President Clinton's attack on "loud and angry voices" and "promoters of paranoia" was motivated by political expediency. So what? His critics are so accustomed to impugning motives that they've lost sight of the substance of what he said.

As if motive was something only adventitious to substance; as if what was said could somehow be separated from the tastelessness of saying it in this particular context.

President Clinton of course had temptations of his own. But the man who not long before had demonstrated that his shamelessness knew few bounds when he claimed to have been "vindicated" by Robert McNamara's *mea culpa* on Vietnam had at least the good grace to draw back at once from any suggestion that he meant his Republican political opponents or their supporters in the media—*viz.* a few radio talk show hosts. It was his own media party which took the hint and got into the really crass business of naming those political opponents who could be somehow implicated in the bombing. As Rush Limbaugh put it with more accuracy than metaphorical coherence, "the people in the White House have to know that by painting with a broad brush as the president has—that the mainstream media with such an obvious dislike or bias against me and other talk radio hosts will take that broad brush and run with it."



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Running with a broad brush, as our mothers always told us, can be dangerous. But those who took it up must have felt protected to some degree by the general tone and tenor of political debate since the Republican Congress was elected in November. On the morning that the Oklahoma City bomb went off, an editorial in *The Wall Street Journal* noticed "that 'extremist' looks to be in 1995–96 what the phrase 'Willie Horton' was in 1992, an all-purpose epithet designed to shut off political debate."

The editorial noted such uses of the term as that of Mike McCurry, President Clinton's press secretary, when he deplored "extremists within the right-to-life movement who now have hooked the Republican Party in Congress by the nose," or of Howard Dean, the governor of Vermont, who used the word to describe his gubernatorial colleagues who wanted to reform welfare. The most promiscuous user of the term, according to a Nexis search, was Vice President Al Gore, who has "used the phrase to describe anyone who wants to privatize public television or who opposes Henry Foster's nomination to be surgeon general."

Little did they know! Even before the president put an end to the brief period of national unity that ensued upon the bombing, Carl Rowan, on "Inside Washington," was rumbling about "angry white men" (long considered by the media to have the electoral blood of the Democratic majority on their hands), and it didn't take much for him to start naming names: "I am absolutely certain the harsher rhetoric of the Gingriches and the Doles . . . creates a climate of violence in America." Others rushed in with similar indictments, though they were more often of Limbaugh and Gordon Liddy (who foolishly gave a hostage to his critics by explaining where to shoot a marauding agent of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms) rather than of Messrs. Dole and Gingrich.

The news pages of *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post* in particular began to run long articles about armed militias, presumed to consist of "right-wing" ideologues. They continued to run them (at least the *Times* and the *Post* did) for weeks afterward. The supply of right-wing militias as yet unreported on showed no signs of giving out. Such stories found it easy to retail some of the loonier things that "the extreme-right militia groups" believed—for instance that there is a Russian army under U.N. command in Mexico, waiting the signal to invade the U.S., or that "microwave ovens zap the nutrients right out of foods," or that the government had itself planted the bomb in order to discredit the lunatics. You see what "right-wing" means, don't you? And you know who the most powerful "right-wing" politicians are, don't you?

Such logic was as disingenuous as the *New York Times* editorial about how awful it was of us at first to have suspected the Arabs: "Now the nation will be forced to look more closely at what is happening within its own borders where the evil is more difficult to acknowledge." As if it has ever been difficult any time this quarter century for *The New York Times* to acknowledge evil within the nation's own borders! On the contrary, they seek it out, just as they did Mr. Mark Koernke, a bona fide right-wing nut with a short-wave radio broadcast which he uses to inveigh against "the New World Order"—by which he means a coming totalitarian, one-world government. Koernke was soon picked up by the rest of the media as their showcase example of a dangerous and hate-filled broadcaster.

As Charles Krauthammer wrote of the president's non-specific condemnation of the hatemongers: "Clinton repeatedly charged dark and unseen forces, a shadowy and unnamed 'they' with spreading paranoia—a classic of the very paranoid style of politics Clinton is ostensibly decrying." In the same way, the many media voices raised against hatred on the right soon became so shrill as to be indistinguishable from those they were denouncing. Did it not strike Jacob Weisberg, even for a moment, as the tiniest bit ironic that his piece in *New York*



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magazine denouncing the hate tactics of the right should have advertised itself on the cover with pictures of Phil Gramm, Oliver North, Rush Limbaugh, and others headed: "The Un-Americans"?

"We must tread carefully," says Weisberg, but his attack on rhetorical intemperance soon begins to look pretty intemperate itself:

> The blame game has been a major mode of conservative discourse for years now. It's hard to find a social ill or evil event that some conservative won't try to attribute to the permissiveness and moral relativism taken to be an adjunct of Democratic liberalism.

He cites, for example, Dan Quayle's attack on Murphy Brown and Newt Gingrich's suggestion that the moral inadequacy of Susan Smith, the mother from South Carolina who drowned her children, was somehow the responsibility of liberal Democrats. He has a point. But he does not mention other intemperate statements such as Richard Gephardt's calling the Republicans "trickle-down terrorists." He does not mention the comparison made by Rep. Major R. Owens of New York of the Republican regime in Congress to a "massacre" or his claiming that "it is not exaggerating to say that we are about to behold something similar to a group of barbarians burning down a city." He does not mention the fact that the new head of the NAACP, Myrlie Evers-Williams, has spoken of the Republicans as "making starvation public policy."

Nor does he mention the use made by Rep. John Lewis of Georgia of the famous warning by Martin Niemöller about how "they" [i.e., Nazis] came first for the Communists, then the Jews, then the trade unionists, then the Catholics, and finally himself. "Read the Republican contract," said Lewis. "They are coming for the children. They are coming for the poor. They are coming for the sick, the elderly and the disabled."

Nor is there any mention of the words of Rep. Martin Frost of Texas, who said in a fund-raising letter on behalf of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee that Newt Gingrich was "one of the most dangerous figures to emerge in American politics during our lifetime" and that he "promotes the policies of a terrorist by backing legislation that will eliminate anti-drug programs for America's youth."

Weisberg admits that there is fault on the other side, but it goes a long way back. It is true that "the infamous *New York Review of Books* Molotov-cocktail cover of 1967 and Leonard Bernstein's 'Radical Chic' party for the Black Panthers in 1970 *did* help to create the climate in which the Weathermen and the Symbionese Liberation Army flourished during the sixties and seventies." But that was a long time ago. Now it is the Republicans who are entertaining the men of violence. "The fringe right has been a welcome guest at Newt Gingrich's party just as the Black Panthers were at Lenny's."

Just as? Well, no. Not exactly. That turns out to have been a bit of rhetorical license—which is presumably not to be denied to Weisberg if it is to his opponents. He just couldn't resist that pun on the word "party." But he has not uncovered a benefit bash thrown by the Gingriches on behalf of those who advocate violent means to political ends. All he means is that because some Republicans are against abortion, they must bear responsiblity for those who shoot abortionists, and because some Republicans are against gun control and the BATF they must bear responsibility for those who shoot —well, anybody. Or anybody not shot by the BATF or other Federal law-enforcement agencies, whose actions at Waco and in the killing of Randy Weaver's wife and son in Idaho seem unproblematical to him.

On this view, right-wingers are under a moral obligation strenuously to denounce not only the violent actions of those who share their aims but, often, the aims themselves. Opposing a federal ban on assault weapons is the equivalent of raising funds for Tim McVeigh and his wacko friends. Not



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agreeing with Michael Lind about the anti-Semitism of Pat Robertson is equivalent to being anti-Semitic oneself, or a believer in Robertson's wacky theories. Doubting the official verdict of suicide on Vincent Foster is the equivalent of accusing Bill Clinton of murder. Even being in the same party with some people who have made too little effort to "distance themselves" from Jerry Falwell —who really does accuse the president of murder—is enough to be marked with the taint of Oklahoma City.

This is what J. Weisberg and *New Yorker* evidently consider treading carefully. If it does not chill your blood that a United States Congresswoman, Helen Chenoweth of Idaho, thinks that the FBI's shooting dead one of her constituents, a mother with a baby in her arms, is "excessive force" (or if, perhaps, it is rather the action of the FBI that chills your blood), then you might have a hard time understanding exactly how it is that Ms. Chenoweth, by sharing some of the anxieties about the arrogance of federal law enforcement felt by militia members, is engaging in the moral equivalent of throwing a benefit for the Panthers.

Likewise, Adam Gopnik in *The New Yorker* writes that "it is no great exaggeration to say that *American Survival Guide* is just *The American Spectator* with bazooka ads." Well, maybe a *little* exaggeration, huh Adam? Exaggeration is never "great" when it is his exaggeration—or when, in the graceful *New Yorker* style, it makes for a pleasing parallel or antithesis. Gopnik, for example, develops a fetching rhetorical conceit out of the fact that "the left's bombs . . . were often duds" while the right's (you remember all those right-wing bombs don't you?) were more often successful because the difference between left and right was "the difference between the kids who paid attention in social studies and the ones who paid attention in shop."

But there is a curious kind of provincialism in his identifying as "a peculiarly American confusion"—dating back to the early days of the settlement of the West—our American penchant for "intertwining of real violence and its romance." Has there ever been a culture in which violence has *not* been romanticized in some way? But Gopnik can see nothing beyond portentous pop-cultural manifestations:

> If violence in America leads a kind of double life, as both folk culture and real killing, that double life has produced the peculiarly American overlap of style with action, rhetoric with reality. We are all implicated in this: the intellectual writing for the *Times* who pretends that gangsta rap is part of a continuum with Baptist preaching; the *frisson*-seeking movie critic who wants his *Pulp Fiction* and cannot see that having it might help explain why he cannot allow his children out after five o'clock in the afternoon; and the right-wing thinkers and politicians who have spent fifteen years inventing a demonic abstract enemy called the federal government and now have to explain that they never meant to be taken literally.

Literally is just what they *did* mean to be taken. What they *didn't* mean to be taken as doing was advocating metaphorically, symbolically, analogically, or anagogically the blowing-up of federal buildings or the killing of federal employees.

It is interesting, too, that Gopnik should mention *Pulp Fiction*, a film which has nothing to do with violence on the streets and everything to do with violence in the movies. It is a violent movie unashamedly about movie violence, rather than about real life, with which anyone who saw it could not confuse it. But if there is anyone in our society who owns the copyright on "inventing a demonic abstract enemy called the federal government" it is the movie people. A week or so after Gopnik's piece appeared the number-one film in the country was *Crimson Tide*, which posits a nuclear-submarine captain (and a significant portion of his crew) so eager to start firing his missiles at Russia that he won't even wait until he can get a confirmation of the order before firing them.

A few weeks before that, the top movie in



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the country was *Outbreak*, in which a high-ranking general was prepared to wipe out an entire town of American citizens in order to cover up his own experimentation with biological warfare. A few weeks before that, *Legends of the Fall* depicted a massacre of federal agents and police by the family of a crusty old Indian fighter gone sour on "the government" as a good thing. Before that, *A Clear and Present Danger* portrayed the president of the United States himself as willing to countenance murder in order to cover up his own corruption. Such plot-lines date back to the post-Watergate spate of films like *All the President's Men* or *Capricorn One* or *Three Days of the Condor*, which first began taking it for granted that all the suits and brass hats high up in the government are corrupt—if not killers, torturers, and sexists to boot.

Nowadays this kind of thing has become so familiar that the federal government is to Hollywood what the Nazis or the Indians used to be: a shorthand for evil that is in need of no further explanation. Is this "right-wing"? Do Hollywood producers go to William F. Buckley and R. Emmett Tyrrell for their ideas about how next to "demonize" the government? It is rather the shallow and superficial intelligences which dominate Hollywood who have retained so indelibly the left-wing, anti-government mythography of Vietnam and Watergate. That is why Oliver Stone is a major player there, though there are certifiable lunatics with a better grasp of reality. This is the real point about *Pulp Fiction*: that having a grasp of reality is increasingly no prerequisite for marketing success in the popular culture. When *JFK* sells as history, what constraints do we expect to be placed on fiction? They don't call it "pulp" for nothing.

Most often, commentators approached the question of culpability for the Oklahoma bombings by using the "No, but . . ." technique. Thus Michael Lind in *The Washington Post*'s "Outlook" section wrote that "Limbaugh, Gingrich and others . . . cannot be charged with encouraging the terrorist right solely on the basis of their hyperbolic metaphors." But. "But there is more at issue here than metaphors. Mainstream conservatives, it can be argued, have helped to legitimate the world view of the Oklahoma City bombers and the Michigan Militia—and they have done so by means not of rhetoric but of ideology." The fact that "it can be argued" is not to be construed as meaning that Lind is arguing it. He is not. He is assuming it. Because his particular *bête noir*, Pat Robertson, believes a lot of the same things that the militias believe and because Timothy McVeigh was once associated with a militia, there is in his mind a direct link between Robertson and McVeigh. Likewise, because they believe the same things that the people who shoot abortionists and bomb abortion clinics believe —i.e., that abortion is wrong—even non-Robertsonian, non-militia, non-shooting, and non-bombing "right-wingers" must be counted guilty of being "scofflaw conservatives." This is what passes for reasoning in the pages of *The Washington Post*.

The critics of the right do have a serious point to make, though it is not necessarily the one they think they are making. For the identification of conservatives with militias and militias with terrorists says far more about those who make it than it does about conservatives, militias or terrorists. The fact is that the coastal liberal elites really do believe that all those people in states like Ohio and Michigan, people who have lately taken to electing conservatives, are right-wing wackos who would as soon shoot you as look at you. That is one reason why they want to take away their guns. It is the *Easy Rider* view of America, which intellectuals who would be too frightened actually to get to know any real conservatives have never outgrown.

At least Christopher Hitchens, writing in *The Nation*, is honest about this. Loudly protesting against that magazine's feeble efforts to associate the bombers with "a broader political culture of the right" he cites the case of the good citizens of Oklahoma City who in the immediate aftermath



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of the bombing terrorized an innocent family of Iraqis and caused, it is thought, the stillbirth of their child.

> The vigilantes who paid a call on the Al Saidi home were also no doubt shaped by a nexus of pervasive cultural and political bigotry. But they were otherwise nice, normal, everyday neighborly Americans. When I spoke to the Al-Saidis they said that nobody from the big family of Oklahoma City government had even so much as contacted them. This climate of nastiness and callousness is created not by right-wing demagogues but by the self-satisfied mainstream.

Hitchens's belief in "the fascist underworld in this country" is only more frankly stated than similar beliefs held by his ideological fellows. That is why it makes perfect sense to them to identify their political opponents with terrorist bombers: because they believe that their political opponents, though perhaps not killers themselves, derive their electoral support from those hordes of gun-toting, trigger-happy good old boys of which the Middle America that they so fear is made up.

All the press's sentimentalizing about the "loss of innocence" and "terror in the heartland" is the reverse of the same coin: the media always knew about the dark underside of Middle America. See for instance *The New Republic*'s reference to "a great country, with a darkness to match." Or Russell Baker's fearful warning that "it's a violent place, the heartland. Always has been." The media never get tired of imagining that the rest of the world has at long last woken up to their view of the American "mainstream." That is why the "loss of innocence" is so often and so loudly proclaimed. The innocence is the innocence of savagery. As I noted in these pages three months ago, the likes of Michael Lind regard "the world beyond the Hudson River" as a kind of Heart of Darkness, the scene of unspeakable brutality and violence, which would shock and sicken the yuppie right—who are only playing at being conservative—*if* they knew what monsters real conservatives are. To him, Oklahoma City was the proof of it.

Thus, although the temptation to seize political advantage from the bombing must have been great, there is also a sincere belief by many among the punditry that that atrocity was not an aberration but the natural concomitant of political views of the sort which brought the Republicans in Congress to power. Republican sympathizers and conservatives have hitherto busied themselves, in their humble and rather pathetic way, with denying that they are terrorists. They perhaps have not had time to notice what it says about their opposition that so many among them sincerely think they *are* terrorists, or that their beliefs imply terrorism. It's what we might call the Paranoid Style in American politics, to coin a phrase.



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Books

# Turning inward into poetry

*by John Haines*

*What is* not *interesting is that which does not add to our knowledge of any kind; that which is vaguely conceived and loosely drawn . . .*
—Matthew Arnold

When the poet Paul Hoover's new anthology arrived in the mail, I was impressed first by its thickness and weight, then by its title. *Postmodern American Poetry*[1] would seem to cover a great deal of ground, an entire historical period, and might alone justify the heft of the volume, leaving room for poets of many sorts and persuasions. Aren't we all, I thought, in some way postmodern, if one understands by that the fact of coming after the first generation of moderns, whose achievement might, for some at least, seem so overwhelming as to constitute a major aesthetic barrier?

When I leafed through the anthology I found myself both surprised and disappointed. Where were the names I expected to find, and the poems? Where were Louis Simpson, James Wright, Donald Hall, and others of my generation? Where were Wendell Berry, Thomas McGrath, and William Stafford? Where, given the context and the poetics, were older poets like George Oppen and Kenneth Rexroth?

And then it became clear to me that I was for the moment engaged with what appears to be a subculture of poetry, whose prominent names include Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, Diane Wakoski and Ron Padgett, Anne Waldman and David Lehman, along with an array of younger talents, many of them previously unknown to me. A school, if you like—roughly dating from the early 1950s to the late 1980s—made up predominately of actors and declaimers, one of whose major premises seems to be that the poem as traditionally understood and met with on the printed page, to be hand-carried in a book or committed to memory, has become obsolete, and what now matters is the poem—or a typographical arrangement of words and half-words—intended for delivery to an audience, and essentially a performance art. And if this is so, then why so massive a collection of "poems" intended for the printed page, to be read and assessed as such?

Nonetheless, here was the book, if only by its weight demanding attention and some estimate of its value to a potential reader. A typical example from this poetry, chosen more or less at random, might read like this:

> Ink of this Egyptian knock over night
> when the belly calms the whole roars, rows
> of anything inch to ape the dust, the ouncing
> Can you one-hand raise the Proper Vehicle?
> (Clark Coolidge)

The two chief mentors behind this poetry would seem to be Ezra Pound and W. C.

1 *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, edited by Paul Hoover; Norton, 701 pages, $19.95 paper.



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Williams, among the inventors of the age, and for many of us, initially at least, sources to be cherished even when not freely imitated. From their innovations in line and stanza, in their concept of the poem, has come much of the verse we wish to keep alive.

The anthology opens with Charles Olson, and much of what follows can be attributed to Olson and his ideas; ideas that in turn derive mainly from Pound and Williams, as Olson attempts a kind of codification of them for his own purposes. The confusion in Olson's arguments, the studied innovations in his verse style, can be traced throughout the anthology, and account for what is most at fault here: the formlessness, the posturing and self-promotion, the absence of a convincing intellectual structure, and much else of a negative cast. Here is a typical passage from Olson's essay "Projective Verse," which opens the prose critical theory appendix to the anthology:

> . . . a poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge.

Having absorbed the mannerisms in Olson's prose, one may feel impelled to ask whether a Keats ode, or perhaps Arnold's "Dover Beach," is not of its nature a *high energy-construct*, as offensive as the pseudo-technocratic formulation may be. But it is by way of such formulations that Olson gained the audience he sought and needed among younger poets at the time. A lengthy examination of Olson's arguments lies beyond the scope of this review, but undertaken in the right spirit would reveal, I believe, a surprising amount of phony scholarship.

The pretentiousness in Olson's prose is matched by a similar quality in his verse:

> The landscape (the landscape!) again:
> Gloucester,
> the shore one of me is (duplicates), and from
> which
> (from offshore, I, Maximus) am removed,
> observe.
>
> ("The Librarian")

One observes here mainly the oddities in phrasing, the eccentric references to a fictional self, the straining after effect, etc., which are easily duplicated in any number of examples from later poets in this anthology. For example, this from Charles Bernstein:

> Who's on first? The dust descends as
> the skylight caves in. The door
> closes on a dream of default and
> denunciation (go get those piazzas),
> hankering after frozen (prose) ambiance . . .
>
> ("Whose Language")

And so on. Taken simply as fun, as play with language, such stuff may amuse for a page or two, but when confronted with close to six hundred pages of it the unindoctrinated reader might well wonder if a terminal disaster had struck the language, and we would soon be speaking gibberish to one another. This is, by and large, a poetry cut off from normal discourse and apparently content to speak to itself alone.

If, as Robert Creeley says (quoted by Hoover in his introduction), "meaning is not importantly referential," then we are at a point of moral and aesthetic vacancy: anything goes and nothing is of greater value than anything else.

As if to verify just how pervasive this thinking can be, here is a sample of poetic theory from Bernstein:

> My interest in not conceptualizing the field of the poem as a unitary plane, and so also not using overall structural programs: that any prior principle of composition violates the priority I want to give to the inherence of surface, to the total necessity in the durational space of the poem . . .

You can write this way about poetry only if you believe that a poem is an object, subject



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to mechanical laws, of value to the extent that it obeys those laws. Let us contrast Bernstein's statement with a brief comment by Wendell Berry:

> The form of a poem is invisible. A poem is not an "object." This is hard to accept in a mechanical age.
>
> ("Unspecializing Poetry")

A further indication of the attitude that underlies much of this anthology can be grasped in a comment by John Ashbery as quoted by Hoover:

> Most reckless things are beautiful, just as religions are beautiful because of the strong possibility that they are founded on nothing.

On the contrary. Religions, when alive, or even when in decay, are beautiful because they are founded on *something*, and on the certainty that this something governs all of life and human conduct. Without that something, human life tends radically to the chaos and civil disorder we find increasingly present among us today. And it is, by extension, precisely the order imposed on the random material of life by the creative intelligence that makes the difference in art and literature, and in philosophy as well.

One of the more irritating characteristics of the critical commentaries of this anthology is the recurring use of the word "organic" in reference to poetic form. Let it be said here that the form of a classical ode, in the hands of a Keats or a Wordsworth—or for that matter, the rhymed quatrain as adapted by Coleridge for his "Ancient Mariner"—becomes in fact *organic*, and does so mainly through its transformation by a true poet. Certainly, the form of an Eliot "Quartet" becomes organic through that poet's use of it, his invention of it, based as it is on past forms and usage. It is, in the end, the example in all of its mastery that makes the difference.

We can hardly hope to escape from the basic forms of the art and retain anything of that art. As sentence and paragraph are fundamental to prose, so line and stanza are basic to verse. Break these up as you will, into a visually interesting pattern on the page, the poem sooner or later returns to that which is of its nature, and without which it cannot exist. And I say this while acknowledging that poetry (in the larger, epic sense of it) can exist convincingly as prose—in the form of prose narrative, in the novel.

An additional problem with the work in this anthology is that it does not avoid the narcissism and sentimentality by which Hoover in his introduction describes what he calls "the mainstream." If it is that "egotistical sublime" referred to here by Olson that we are to be rid of, could there be anything more burdened and deformed by ego than the typical poem collected here?

> Our skin, strenuously tutored to appreciate
> the vernacular
> body a feeling might have. Companies
> of hands, legs, cigarettes, a whip, the sea . . .
>
> (Marjorie Welish)

In writing like this, postmodernism is already a dead style. "Composition by field," as originally proposed by Olson, is a bogus theory. As if the working out of a canto by Dante did not constitute working in a "field"—a space in the mind, or the imagination—and for which the printed page is a form of testimony, a proof of permanence.

It has been tempting, while considering what to say of this volume, to simply quote from the poems and let these speak for themselves without commentary. But I would like at this point to make use of what I feel is a valid comparison. The following lines are from a late poem by Wallace Stevens:

> . . . And a third form, she that says
> Good-by in the darkness, speaking quietly
> there,
> To those that cannot say good-by themselves.
>
> ("The Owl in the Sarcophagus")



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And here are the opening lines of a poem by Ashbery:

> The arctic honey blabbed over the report
> causing darkness
> And pulling us out of there experiencing it
> he meanwhile . . . And the fried bats they
> sell there
> dropping from sticks . . .
> ("Leaving the Atocha Station")

An even more extreme example from Susan Howe:

> heroine in ass-skin
> mouthing O Helpful
> = father revivified waking when
> nickname Hero men take pity spittle speak
> ("White Foolscap")

It is saddening that the grace and command, the grave seriousness of a Stevens should have been reduced to the random catalogue of an Ashbery, to the declamatory nonsense of a Howe. And further, that so few are aware of the difference, of the transition and decline that are implied here. The various visual tricks by which the poems are ordered on the page cannot disguise the basic lack of substance in them. What little is being said, or that might be said, would require a concentration beyond the abilities of most of these poets, a fact of which they seem unaware. Poetry like this arises from a fundamental immaturity in the culture. Games, wordplay, snickers, nose-thumbing —a tabloid equivalent of the art; the equal in verse of a Warhol in painting, closer to a media event than an artistic one. For the most part, these poets fail for lack of what Williams in his best work demonstrably had: details, particulars, of the actual physical world around him, and of the human individuals who were present also. What we have here, typically, is the interior of minds not in themselves of great interest.

Having lived uncomfortably with this anthology for several months, my general impression is of a sprawling, untutored adolescence, apparently afflicted with a vast craving for attention. Toward the end of it, whether it is Tom Clark, Clark Coolidge, Robert Grenier, or Susan Howe, it all begins to sound the same, the product of people who do not know when to stop talking. Is there any essential difference between the running-off-at-the-mouth verse of, say, David Antin, and the general aspect of the mass media? I doubt it. There are few poems here that could not have been substantially improved by revision. Much that might have been made into something worthwhile is simply thrown away.

This description is admittedly unfair to the few good poets and worthwhile poems contained herein. With careful selection, from Levertov, Ferlinghetti, Snyder, Ginsberg, et al., along with a handful of things from a few of the later poets, a modest addition to our poetry might have been made. Robert Duncan had a voice and style of his own, and there are moments of coherence and beauty in his work. In a major poem printed here, "A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar," a brief passage of seventeen lines naming some of the American presidents might well stand on its own as a poem. Gregory Corso's "Marriage" remains for some a classic. Russell Edson's "Ape" is a poem among the best of its kind, and in its inventive humor not easily repeated. The first stanza of John Wieners's "The Waning of the Harvest Moon" is striking in its momentary seriousness. As for Allen Ginsberg, represented here by a few pages from "Howl" and selections from two or three later poems, and though I have always been taken with his meeting Walt Whitman in a supermarket, I am often reminded of a remark by Louis Simpson many years ago, that the opening lines of "Howl," in which Ginsberg claims to have seen "the best minds" of his generation, are untrue; he saw nothing of the sort.

Paul Hoover's introduction, even where one disagrees with much of what he proposes, is probably as inclusive a discussion of the scene as one could expect, given the scope of this book and the number of writers



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included. Yet even the best among these poets, and they are mostly the older ones, seem in the context oddly weightless, not sufficiently represented by their best work. In fairness, it would be difficult to imagine any poet, on the basis of a brief selection in an anthology like this one, not being submerged in the mass of mediocrity so much in evidence here.

In *Postmodern American Poetry* we have roughly six hundred pages of poems and biographical notes, with an additional seventy or so pages of critical theory. There have been moments in my consideration of this volume when in desperation I would have sought out a copy of FitzGerald's "Omar Khayyám" to reassure myself that poetry, in the old and durable sense, still mattered. I feel confident in saying that I would trade this entire anthology for Wordsworth's "Simplon Pass," for Edward Thomas's "The Coomb," for Yeats's "Song of the Wandering Aengus," for a page or two of Edwin Muir or Thomas Hardy. My best hope is that another generation of poets might be brought to see the folly of a school of poetics as represented here, resolve to grow up, and move on to better things.

The problem for poetry today remains what it has been for decades: to absorb the lessons of modernism and, while retaining the best of tradition, to make of that example something new, while never forgetting the substance of a remark by Stevens: that it is not the form as such but what is created in the poem itself that finally matters. And to that one might usefully add the following from Edwin Muir:

> There remains the temptation for poets to turn inward into poetry, to lock themselves into a hygenic prison where they speak only to one another . . .
>
> (*The Estate of Poetry*)

Muir's warning finds in this anthology ample proof of its truth, and one would have to say the same for most poetic criticism now being written.

# The rebel George Eliot

*Frederick R. Karl*
George Eliot: Voice of a Century.
Norton, 708 pages, $30

*reviewed by Alan Rutenberg*

In this psychological study of George Eliot, Frederick Karl draws a much more complex figure than the official portrait which Gordon Haight presented in his authoritative biography published in 1968. Haight, the editor of Eliot's letters, confined himself to a meticulously documented but largely deferential chronicle; here Frederick Karl freely explores the often hidden patterns and tensions of George Eliot's private life. He proceeds, however, with an attitude of freshening inquiry, not with the malice that has become all too evident in such enterprises. As one might expect of the author of biographies of Joseph Conrad and Franz Kafka, he constructs a detailed account of Eliot as a nineteenth-century outsider, profoundly ambivalent about her emancipation from the conventional roles and ideas of the Victorian period. Unfortunately, his acute psychological analysis is all too often circuitous, tedious, and awkwardly expressed.

The subtitle of the biography, "Voice of a Century," is not quite fair. Although Karl demonstrates a modest interest in a wider historical inquiry, his clearest intention is to correct and deepen the received view of Eliot as a serene intellectual and moralist. As Karl writes, "Eliot is always characterized as our novelist of moderation and balance. But her novels bespeak morbidity, death, and forms of extreme behavior." He notes further that "in her novels, she revelled in failures, in wandering female characters, in depicting poor choices, in cataloguing disastrous marriages." Karl concludes from the evidence of her novels as well as from her extensive correspondence that Eliot in fact suffered throughout her life from a chronic state of depression. He writes: "Frequently, Eliot's career is viewed as one consistent spiral into success after success. Quite the



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opposite was true. . . . She was not only full of self-doubt and had to be protected against adverse criticism; she was often barely able to get through the days without falling into depression and anguish." Karl admits that it is not possible to attribute this depression to anything specific, "except possibly that in her intense effort to transform herself, she had forsaken what could give simple joy." He describes the repeated occasions when Eliot felt entirely defeated and then gathered her wits and emotions to continue her work, and he gives special attention to the serious depression she suffered in the midst of writing her masterpiece, *Middlemarch*. In his fullest summary of her character, however, Karl returns to the familiar attribute of balance, placing it within this new framework:

> We tend to stress her morbid qualities because she emphasized them in her letters, and her books are somber, but they are somber because she felt life was not to be trifled with. She recognized, with classical sense of balance, that pleasure and pain in equal doses are implicit in every act; that all life is choice; and that choice is not in itself a guarantee of rightness.

Karl considers Eliot's life as a series of rebellions from authority and expectation conducted by a deeply conservative temperament. He analyzes her two most significant acts of rebellion—her initial refusal to attend church with her conservative father, and her scandalous yet actually quite conventional *de facto* marriage to George Henry Lewes—as evidence of unresolved conflicts and hostilities which issued in her depression. Throughout the biography Karl emphasizes the fundamental importance of Eliot's father, Robert Evans, who was the bailiff of a large country estate north of Coventry, and who firmly held the conservative religious and political views of the aristocracy he served. He provided his daughter with an unusually serious education, through which she made her initial, highly influential contact with a local nonconformist intellectual circle. In what Karl describes as "the first of her huge decisions to emerge as her own person," Eliot, under the further influence of her extensive reading in philosophy and theology, on January 2, 1842, at the age of twenty-two, refused to accompany her father to church. Karl finds in this act "not only a religious dimension but a considerable amount of hostility toward her father and his position."

Twelve years later, during the summer of 1854, after a period of inconclusive intellectual activity during which Eliot translated Strauss's *Life of Jesus* and Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* and contributed reviews and essays to the intellectual journal *The Westminster Review*, for which she also served as an editor, she established a *de facto* marriage with George Lewes, an intellectual of diverse literary, philosophical, and scientific interests, best known for his biography of Goethe. Lewes, already married and the father of three children, was unable to get a divorce because he had accepted legal responsibility for a child who resulted from his wife's continuing affair with Lewes's own friend Thornton Hunt. According to Karl, this was the critical point in her life, a "great decision, an act of daring on her part which, outside the upper classes, has few equals in Victorian annals."

Karl notes that despite the audacious quality of her act, Eliot wanted to be known as Mrs. Lewes, with only a legal barrier standing between her and respectability. Nevertheless, because her marriage did not have the sanction of law Eliot in fact occupied the social position of a "scarlet woman," and in this defiance of authority Karl finds not a feminist declaration but rather "her ultimate act of hostility to her dead father." Karl offers an illuminating fictional parallel to Eliot's own transformation: in a passage in *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Brooke, facing the forbidden prospect of marrying Will Ladislaw, undergoes what Eliot calls an "alarmed consciousness that her life was taking on a new form. Her whole world was in a state of convulsive change."

While Karl does not claim that any of Eliot's novels are explicitly autobiographical,



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his own procedure as a biographer often connects the novels to Eliot's divided state. He writes: "Those people in her novels who destroy others or who are themselves destroyed . . . fall outside of an ordered life. Behind this desire for order is, not unusually, a woman whose daring, audacious, adventurous choices in life have tested out those very limits of order." Karl traces this destruction throughout her fiction, noting that

> in every novel of Eliot's, except *Middlemarch*, there is brutality and death. . . . In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie and Tom die in the destructive, vehement flood. In *Felix Holt, the Radical*, Felix is accused of murder. In *Romola*, Tito Melema is savagely murdered and tossed into the Arno. In *Daniel Deronda*, Grandcourt drowns, while Gwendolen feels she might have saved him and is, accordingly, a murderer by intention.

*Middlemarch* remains the inevitable centerpiece of the biography. Eliot began the novel under the shadow of the recent inexplicable and painful death of Lewes's son Thornie, and even in the middle of the successful composition of her greatest work, she wrote in despair: "I dare not count on fulfilling any project, my life for the last year having been a sort of nightmare in which I have been scrambling on the slippery bank of a pool, just keeping my head above water." Karl finds in Eliot two sets of character development: one that proceeded smoothly toward intellectual and artistic achievement, and another that courted failure and never truly replaced her loss of faith with an adequate substitute. It is in this context that Karl asserts that the failed scholar Causabon "represents that fearful underside to Eliot that we have seen in her depressions and despair. [He] represents some deeper level of experience which kept her divided, doubtful and uncertain of achievement."

Still, Karl quotes from a letter in which Eliot writes: "I need not tell you that my book [*Middlemarch*] will not present my own feelings about human life if it produces on readers whose minds are really receptive the impression of blank melancholy and despair." Karl considers this antagonism to depression a reflection of Eliot's moral emphasis on the importance of duty and accomplishment. He notes that "there is something of Eliot in Dorothea: the desire to be and do good, the emphasis on duty and discipline, the attempt to define herself in moral and ethical terms."

Why then does Dorothea marry Will Ladislaw, whom Karl aptly describes as a Jamesian adventurer? Karl suggests that in Dorothea's attraction to Ladislaw, Eliot indirectly confronted her own sexual desire and rebellious nature by attempting to depict in the figure of Ladislaw a representation of George Lewes. Gertrude Himmelfarb has recently proposed a more particularly Victorian but not a necessarily more persuasive rationale: she notes that it was in fact the special moral role of the Victorian wife to redeem and transform a corrupted man.

Karl does not generally credit the characteristic moral seriousness of the Victorian intellectual. A famous posthumous commentary on Eliot reports that in a private conversation she had pronounced the "three words which have been used so often as the inspiring trumpet-calls of men—the words, God, Immortality, Duty"—and had stated "how inconceivable was the first, how unbelievable the second, and yet how peremptory and absolute the third." Karl claims that what Eliot suggested was "that everyone be like her: achieve, fulfill, work through one's own needs; then halt, become part of the larger comity, maintain order, rein in one's desire for power and accomplishment." He concludes: "It was a futile quest."

Gertrude Himmelfarb, writing as an intellectual historian in *Marriage and Morals Among the Victorians*, offers a different perspective on Eliot: rather than emphasizing the daring or hostile qualities of her personal decisions, Himmelfarb claims that Eliot, along with other Victorian figures such as



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Mill, Dickens, Ruskin, and Carlyle, attempted to strengthen conventional morality and "to reestablish it on a more serious, a more philosophical basis." She writes: "If these eminent Victorians agonized so over the irregularities and improprieties of their personal lives, it was because they were so anxious about morality itself."

A more complete psychological interpretation of George Eliot than Karl offers here would certainly incorporate the historical perspective of Himmelfarb. In addition, it would fully consider this passage from *The Twilight of the Idols*, in which Nietzsche criticizes the Victorian intellectuals:

> They have got rid of the Christian God and now feel obliged to cling all the more firmly to Christian morality: that is *English* consistency, let us not blame it on little bluestockings *à la* Eliot. In England, in response to every little emancipation from theology one has to reassert one's position in a fear-inspiring manner as a moral fanatic. That is the penance one pays there.

A biography which adequately described that penance would perhaps require the intelligence and the depth of George Eliot herself. It would certainly have the character of one of her novels.

# The yeoman's tale

*Lee Hall* Olmsted's America: An "Unpractical" Man and His Vision of Civilization. Bulfinch Press/Little, Brown, 270 pages, $40

*reviewed by Francis Morrone*

Frederick Law Olmsted was a white male. One is repeatedly reminded of this fact at the outset of *Olmsted's America*, a new life-and-times of one of the most remarkable white males of the nineteenth century. Silly as it may seem for the reader to be thus reminded of Olmsted's race and sex, one does not read far in this book before wishing that the author, Lee Hall, had *continued* in this vein of platitudinizing. Then the book may have been a peppery P.C. stew. As it is, Ms. Hall is relatively restrained in her overt politicizing, and her book lacks even the one demi-virtue we've come to associate with the P.C. productions of today's academia: namely, that they typically are wondrous mountains of recently disgorged primary materials. Instead, this book is simplistic, dull, notably lacking in critical viewpoint or scholarly purpose, and without a single original thing to say about its subject.

That subject is a titanic and complex figure in American civilization. Born in 1822 into a prosperous and cultured Hartford, Connecticut, family, Olmsted was a student of modest attainments, and did not, as his younger brother, John, did, attend Yale College. Instead, Olmsted indulged a romantic taste for physical adventure, and went to sea. He was set on his life's course by his experience of the degraded life of a merchant seaman, and his earliest published writings were articles advocating "the creation of schools to train sailors in seamanship, order, and discipline."

He exemplified the New England characteristics of puritanism and yeomanry, and, again in a characteristic New England vein, he found scientific rationalism a congenial creed. His next career was that of a gentleman scientific farmer, on Staten Island. "He hoped to secure for himself," writes Ms. Hall, "the happy, moral, aesthetic life he imagined to be the benison of the diligent American farmer." At about the same time he fell in with his brother's Yale College set, which included Charles Loring Brace, who would later become famous as one of urban America's most zealous mid-century advocates of progressive reform. Though Olmsted cultivated a reforming zeal, it remained tempered by his native conservatism, and he was no radical. What he was, according to Lee Hall, "was the quintessential nineteenth-century man, an autocrat by nature and a patriarch by nurture. [I am unsure why one is by nature and the other is by



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nurture, but we will let that pass.] . . . When we are poised on the threshold of the twenty-first century and view the historical Olmsted as the genius progenitor of landscape architecture, it is easy to disregard the degree to which his personality and social values were shaped by his gender and his century and by his high regard for domesticity." As for his scientific farm on Staten Island, Olmsted showed his true colors, working "harder on effecting picturesque surroundings than on taking cash crops to market." His greatest influence at the time was the American architect Andrew Jackson Downing, who worked out of Newburgh, New York, and published the magazine *The Horticulturalist*. Downing was the principal promoter of the picturesque aesthetic in America. Olmsted's learning grew by leaps and bounds in the course of his failed betrothal to a young woman of sharp intellect, who persuaded the young farmer to read Ruskin and Emerson—writers whose impact on Olmsted can only be guessed at from this book, for Lee Hall tells us nothing on the subject.

The third of Olmsted's careers, following seaman and gentleman farmer, was that of journalist. The new career grew from his first trip abroad, to England in 1850, during which he kept copious notes that he later shaped into a book-length travel essay, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*. But of greater import to future American cityscapes, Olmsted's English sojourn introduced him to the civilizational marvel that is the English countryside, and solidified the primacy of the aesthetic in his worldview. Though in England for the ostensible purpose of studying farming from a scientific point of view, Olmsted was carried on a wave of romantic feeling, so amply demonstrated by passages from his notebooks. To wit:

> The great beauty and peculiarity of the English landscape [elsewhere referred to by Olmsted as "green, dripping, glistening, gorgeous"] is to be found in the frequent long, graceful lines of deep green hedges and hedge-row timber, crossing hill, valley, and plain, in every direction, and in the occasional large trees, dotting the broad fields, either singly or in small groups, left to their natural open growth . . . therefore branching low and spreading wide, and more beautiful, much more beautiful, than we often allow our trees to make themselves.

Or:

> . . . a gracefully irregular, gently undulating surface of close-cropped pasture land . . . trees scattered singly and in groups—so far apart as to throw long unbroken shadows across broad openings of light, and leave the view in several directions unobstructed for a long distance. Herds of fallow-deer, fawns, cattle, sheep, and lambs quietly feeding near us, and moving slowly in masses at a distance.

These are superb passages, and show that Olmsted, however lacking in formal education, possessed an acute faculty of aesthetic response, a strong sense of visual and verbal organization, and a true feeling for the rhythms of the English language. In such passages we glimpse nothing less than an American Ruskin.

Though Olmsted deplored the English aristocratic practice of forcibly uprooting rural communities in order to build or expand country houses, his aesthetic admiration of the gardens of Lancelot "Capability" Brown was undiminished. It would indeed appear that Olmsted saw no paradox in his dual admiration of Capability Brown and of Uvedale Price. Now, this seems to me to be exactly the sort of thing with which a book on Olmsted's "vision of civilization" ought to be concerned. Ms. Hall earlier remarks on Olmsted "the young man who had pored over the books of Uvedale Price and William Gilpin." I may be wrong, but I've always thought that a man's "vision of civilization" is very largely a matter of the books he's "pored over." Yet what, in even its most general outline, Olmsted found when he "pored over" Price and Gilpin is not even hinted at by Lee Hall.



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In the 1850s Olmsted served as an editor of *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, by all odds the most distinguished American periodical of its day (most distinguished in the world, said Thackeray). It was the magazine home of Thoreau, Emerson, Melville, and Longfellow, i.e., the very voice of New York–New England culture of the antebellum years. Olmsted greatly benefited from his writings' exposure in *Putnum's*, though not from his having invested money (borrowed from his father) in the publishing firm of Dix, Edwards & Co., which had purchased the magazine from George Palmer Putnam. The failure of Dix, Edwards, we may ascertain, marked a watershed in the career trajectory of the thirty-five-year-old Olmsted. Again, here is a case where the man was an editor of, a writer for, and an investor in one of the world's leading magazines: it could not have helped profoundly influencing Olmsted's "vision of civilization." Yet, and you're probably beginning to glean the pattern, Ms. Hall glosses over this episode as though she were describing, say, someone's newfound predilection for golf.

And again, in what follows, we get but a gloss of the intricate and fortuitous process by which Olmsted—who, though he had richly varied experiences, did not exactly possess a résumé telling of singleness of purpose—managed to get himself named to the plum post of supervisor of New York City's Central Park project. Olmsted was nearing middle age, unmarried, a failed farmer and an impecunious writer when, in 1857, thanks largely to a chance acquaintance with Charles Wyllis Elliott, he got the job of supervising the construction of the new public park for which Andrew Jackson Downing, William Cullen Bryant, and others had long been agitating.

Olmsted would not merely supervise the construction of the park, but, as had not been initially foreseen, the park would be built to a design in part Olmsted's own. A Downing disciple, an Englishman named Calvert Vaux (pronounced not in the French manner, but as in "Vauxhall"), approached Olmsted about collaborating on an entry in the competition for the design of the park. It has since been a matter of considerable controversy which of the two partners was more responsible for the basic design of the park. Ms. Hall is rather noncommittal on the subject, since after all Olmsted is the hero of her story. But in fact, while Olmsted certainly contributed a very great deal, the hard work of designing the thing devolved upon the gifted Vaux, and much of what is today most celebrated in the park's design—the Bethesda Terrace sequence, Bow Bridge, the Ramble—is really the work of Calvert Vaux. And to the extent that Vaux's master was Ruskin, it seems to me incumbent upon any historian of Central Park to comment upon the pervasive influence of Ruskin's aesthetic theories in Civil War–era New York. Such commentary, need I say, is not forthcoming from Ms. Hall.

In 1859 Olmsted took time off from his work on Central Park to visit Europe. In Paris he met Adolphe (here misidentified as "Jean") Alphand and studied Haussmann's boulevards. This interlude in Olmsted's life is disposed of in a single brief paragraph, and the reader is left uncertain of how this Parisian sojourn may have affected Olmsted's outlook. I believe the impact was profound: Olmsted's later work in designing Eastern and Ocean parkways in Brooklyn, and in designing the grounds of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, relates very directly to the works of Haussmann and Alphand. On the same trip, Olmsted visited Richard Mayne of the London police, whom the American consulted on the subject of how to police a park: not only did Olmsted, as has often been pointed out, think that Central Park would be unsafe at night, but he also felt that the American people needed schooling in the proper use and treatment of a park. Today's Park Rangers (who are indeed vested with certain police powers) are the end product of Olmsted's meeting with Mayne, though—the fine work of the Rangers notwithstanding—one suspects Olmsted would be, to put it mildly, appalled at the manner in



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which the park is used and abused today.

Central Park's gestation was far from smooth, but it is to Lee Hall's credit that she views the politics of the thing as somewhat tangential to the story she has to tell, thus avoiding the "social history" approach of Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar's *The Park and the People* (1992). Still, some of Olmsted's opponents—notably Egbert Viele and Andrew Haswell Green—were themselves formidable and fascinating men, though in Ms. Hall's telling they come across as moronic ciphers. Following Central Park and during the Civil War, Olmsted served as chairman of the United States Sanitary Commission, where his chief opponent was the redoubtable New York lawyer George Templeton Strong, whom Ms. Hall deals with more fully and fairly than she does Viele or Green. In 1865, after a stint managing John C. Fremont's Mariposa estate in California, Olmsted returned to New York, first to form *The Nation* with his old friend E. L. Godkin, second to go back to landscape architecture with his former partner Vaux, who had recently won the commission to design Brooklyn's Prospect Park. It is another of the disappointments of Ms. Hall's book that she has so little so say about Prospect Park, which Olmsted and Vaux themselves considered their greatest work and which I, and many others, consider the greatest urban park in America.

From Prospect Park on, first in partnership with Vaux, then on his own, Olmsted became the nation's most renowned landscape designer, winning commissions all across the country, not merely for parks but for whole communities (e.g., the Chicago suburb of Riverside). He designed the grounds for the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago; Boston's "Emerald Necklace"; Montreal's Mount Royal Park, and much, much more. His career in landscape design spanned fully half a century, and moved from the Ruskinian picturesque to the Beaux-Arts of the Chicago fair in a seamless trajectory that belies many of the standard academic distinctions applied to nineteenth-century American architectural history. There's so much in Olmsted's life, writings, and designs the study of which might yield a deeper and more subtle understanding of American culture of the nineteenth century! That historians continue to be daunted by this wealth has a great deal to do with the distorting lens of Pevsner's modernist pedigrees, and perhaps even more with the strange decline in our day of the discipline of intellectual history.

The best recent book on Olmsted is one which, ironically, does not even mention him: it is *The Tory View of Landscape*, by Nigel Everett. Though one may take issue with a great deal of what Everett has to say, his book is a model of exactly the kind of intellectual history that has so far eluded Olmsted. When I say that Everett's study of the cultural and intellectual underpinnings of English landscape design of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is the best recent book on Olmsted, I mean this: read it, and your experience and appreciation of Olmsted's parks will be far more deeply enriched than they will be by reading Lee Hall's book.

# Against anti-science

*Gerald Holton*
Einstein, History, and Other Passions.
American Institute of Physics Press,
312 pages, $29.95

*reviewed by Paul R. Gross*

In the journal *Osiris*, writing on "Scientists as Historians," the historian of science Stephen G. Brush remarks that "readers unfamiliar with recent publications in science studies may not believe that any reputable scholar actually holds such extreme views . . ." The article's burden is that certain "extreme views" are, indeed, widely held in contemporary science studies, a hybrid field tilled, *inter alia*, by historians of science. What are these extreme views? Here is Brush's summary:



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> The current fashion is to stress the social construction of scientific theories and concepts, and to deny that scientists are actually discovering the truth about the world, or that their efforts to do so have any moral or epistemological superiority to those of pseudo-scientists, humanists, and theologians. The historian no longer assumes that scientific research is an admirable activity and scientific progress a benefit to society.

Innocent newcomers to the business, including scientists interested in history, might well ask, "Is this really a current fashion?" We might enlarge the inquiry: "If so, is it, perhaps, no more than current fashion? Is it important?" The answers are, *seriatim*, yes, no, yes.

There are, of course, many historians and philosophers of science, and sociologists of knowledge too, who are not social constructivists or relativists; that is, they do *not* assert that knowledge, or at least all scientific knowledge, is a product solely of social forces, a product *not* determined or constrained by nature or reality. Apologists for the excesses of gender feminists, eco-radicals, literary science-critics, and the like insist upon the rectitude of this solid "center." Among philosophers of science, resisters of constructivism are probably still the majority. But Brush is certainly right about the current fashion. I have before me the syllabus of a current introductory course, in one of our great universities, on the history of science. A conservative estimate of strongly constructivist, science-debunking tracts among the required readings is that they account for at least 60 percent.

Is this new? Well, no, not really. Episodes of Romantic Rebellion against science—typically, against reason—in Western civilization are an old story. They dominate the central chapter of Gerald Holton's splendid new book. The chapter is entitled "What Place for Science in Our Culture at the 'End of the Modern Era'?" Holton thinks, as does Isaiah Berlin, whose analysis he cites here, not only that the current form of Romantic Rebellion is important, but that its embrace of unreason, of solipsism dressed up as "ways of knowing," of *Gaia* and other unlikely deities, is ominous. He believes that it is a threat to civilized life, rather than—as heretofore—a cyclic diversion from that increasing understanding of the world with which we have been blessed.

*Einstein, History, and Other Passions* is at first glance a collection of loosely related articles, with some of the older ones reworked—in other words, a remembrance of studies past. Here are scholarly audits of Einstein, his science, his influence on the wider culture, his loves, and his epistemologies early and late; essays on the place of science in culture, its public image, its historiography; recollections and appreciations of physicists Holton has known and admired (Oppenheimer, Bridgman, Rabi, Feynman, Polanyi); and, not least, meditations upon the teaching of science, especially physics. But the appearance of mere miscellany is deceptive. There is, in fact, a strong and continuous thread upon which these essays are strung. Holton, a physicist-historian who writes history of science, not "science history" (a term of disparagement for the historical musings of scientists), and whose seminal works are read worldwide, recognizes that anti-science in our time is, as in the past, the product of reactionary forces, but also that its potential for mischief is, in proportion to the exponentially growing power of science for good and evil, greater than ever before.

The central chapter recounts the succession, from the nineteenth century to the present, of pro- and anti-scientific public "sentiments," ideologies, social movements, and their intellectual origins. Thus the naïve, rationalist, progressivist optimisms of the late nineteenth century—for example, those coincident with the rise of Monism—came to an end in the primitive brutalities of World War I. Only the emerging Marxism continued thereafter to claim (falsely, of course) its grounding in science. Oswald Spengler's pessimism, his attack on science as cause and symptom of that inevitable



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Decline of the West, foretold the new century's first, but not its last, flight from reason. The logical positivism of the Vienna Circle was a brilliant, but failed, attempt to stem a tide that reached its flood in Hitler's Germany, ecstatic in its racial myths, its glorification of the *Wille zur Macht*, its authorization of mass murder.

Following World War II there came a swing back to reason, optimism, and belief in progress through science. The signal document was *Science, the Endless Frontier* (1945), a report commissioned by President Roosevelt from Vannevar Bush, the head of the wartime Office of Scientific Research and Development. This paper, says Holton, inaugurated thirty years of puppy-love between Western governments and scientific research "and set the stage for the development of new institutions for the support of science." Holton's core account is of the inexorable decay of postwar optimism, and of the equally inexorable, albeit gradual, turning against science, first by intellectuals, and later—now—by larger social and political formations. Holton exemplifies the current situation with the writings and speeches of the courageous literary and political leader Václav Havel, whose widely admired view is that brute statism, absolutism, and Communism have all been *the product* of rationalist—scientistic—hubris! Havel's call is for a new, humanitarian society, renouncing current "science," for a culture grounded in the anthropic cosmological principle, and in belief in, and worship of, *Gaia* the life-mother, the planet Earth.

Such movements, Holton believes, are still top-down, not yet absorbed by the mass of people, for whom science remains a pretty good spectator sport:

> Today's version of the Romantic Rebellion, while strong in other fields, represents still only a seductive minority view among analysts and science policy makers, coming not up from the grass roots but down from the treetops. However, while it is held among prominent persons who can indeed influence the direction of a cultural shift, the scientists . . . have chosen to respond so far merely with quiet acquiescence. If those trends should continue, and the self-designated postmodernists rise to controlling force, the new sensibility in the era to come will be very different indeed from the recently dominant one.

That such a new sensibility may be seriously on the way, and that it may be but little opposed by those who have the most to lose, seems to me quite possible. It is hard to take so dispassionate and historically-informed a view of it as does Holton, seeing, as I do, the dumb enthusiasms of the public media for—and the impending silent acquiescence of official medicine and biomedical science to—the politically driven selling of "alternative healing": e.g., energy healing, touch therapy, magnetic therapy, chelation therapy, shamanic healing, Curanderismo, psycho-medical chirology, Ayurvedic medicine. Such quackeries were only recently, and with good reason, opposed by medical science, except as a sound evidence of their value was adduced in specific cases. Holton's history of Romantic Rebellion is an eye-opener: this central chapter alone is worth the price of the book.

The common thread of all the chapters is, however, an epistemological one. Hence the inclusion of the Einstein chapters, in which the dense interconnections of the physicist's thought with the larger culture are explored. No part of this story is irrelevant to the thread: the doomed love of Einstein and Mileva Marić is as cogent a part of the argument as is the course of their estrangement, as are the themata of Einstein's grapplings with the meanings of physical reality, strongly influenced by, and yet soon independent of, the regnant teachings and the history of the business.

The idea, in Holton's words, of science as "two-dimensional"—that is, of science as thought constrained to a plane whose axes are logic (including mathematics) and empiricism—is rejected in favor of a three-dimensional model in which the volume-generating dimension is what Holton earlier



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named the "thema." Themata are the scientist's feelings about how the world must work, the internal drives for the free play of speculation in which scientific thought is incubated. The public science that emerges from such play—and it doesn't "emerge" if it doesn't work!—is indeed uniquely located by logic and empirical fact; but those dimensions alone do not encompass the mechanism of its making.

The chapters on historiography therefore convey the richness of Holton's study not only of social and cultural conditions surrounding the making of science (i.e., that to which constructivists devote themselves solely), not only to the depths of the science itself (i.e., Whiggish "science-history," which Holton understands as few other historians of physics do), but also to their interactions. A view emerges of science, of the unique product of our culture, that is fully in the round, a view in which transient passions and ideological preoccupations play no part. It is a view that does honor to the history of science, one that argues, by its fertility and the insights it offers, *against* co-optation by one or another trendy or politically correct movement.

This is, of course, an austere position, easy to maintain if one is already an honor-laden Harvard professor, tough if one is a younger historian of science, struggling for recognition within a profession that continues, itself, to struggle for position within the broader academic discipline of history. Nevertheless we ***need*** such austerities: we need them very badly just now, when even seasoned scholars yield to the claim that everything is politics or that "all teaching is indoctrination"; when sober old professors can believe, or at least agree in faculty meetings, that their highest duty is to transform society.

It makes sense, then, for the concluding essays to be concerned with science education, just as it has made sense for Holton, given his scholarly predilections, to involve himself seriously with teaching—not only with the design of curricula but with the intimate techniques of lecturing and demonstrating. His has been a career that falsifies, as do the careers of quite a few other notable scientists, popular generalizations on the incompatibility of research with serious commitment to teaching. Not that science teaching is just fine. Quite the contrary: he sees it, correctly, as deeply troubled by the professional, social, and political conditions in which it is embedded, and in need of reform. Needless to say, his reforms include significant inclusions of history and culture. It is no surprise, in light of his view of how the eventual public science is forged in the inquirer's consciousness.

The final chapter, titled, with tongue in cheek, "Faraday's 'Advice to a Lecturer,' Updated," is the best evaluation I have seen of the much-promoted educational high technology. It must give pause to anyone who is about to be convinced that physics, or for that matter engineering, or molecular biology, or general science, can be taught effectively and cheaply to students in "the electronic classroom," that is, by films or video—or, as Holton names it, by "depiction."

> While lecturers who refuse to use good films from time to time are unnecessarily turning their backs on a major teaching aid, the science class that is conducted chiefly by depiction is, in my view, in danger of being empty at its very center.

An opinion, of course, that is easy enough, especially for reflex-Luddites, to assert. The trick is to justify it. Here, however, as throughout the volume, an important opinion *is* justified, and with grace.

# Autumn epitaph

*Jon Stallworthy* Louis MacNeice. Norton, 572 pages, $35

*reviewed by Thomas Mallon*

He is forever a "young writer of the Thirties," the fourth poet of depression and dictatorship—the last mentioned, the second



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best, the most humanly appealing. As that dogmatic decade came to a close, Auden galloped off to America, Spender began his long plush plod into a half-century afterlife, and Day Lewis the retreat from millennial Marxist to murmuring Laureate. Louis MacNeice, too honest all along to have anything to recant, just stayed alert, keeping his cold but appreciative eyes peeled. Now, more than thirty years after the poet's death, Jon Stallworthy, previously the author of *Wilfred Owen*, has built a sturdy, unstylish biography, overlong by about the same proportion as MacNeice's life (1907–1963) was too short.

As poets go, he had about the right amount of outsiderliness: he was an Irishman operating in England, a Protestant back home. His missionary grandfather had been driven off Omey island in the west by a Catholic mob; his father, the rector of Carrickfergus, angered his Protestant parishioners by being a Home Ruler. MacNeice's own young life was shadowed by a brother's Down's syndrome as well as his mother's depression and premature death, events that Stallworthy works rather hard in a bygone Freudian way. He feels compelled, for example, to italicize the phrase "cubs that have lost their mother," when explicating a poem from 1945 called "Last before America." More worthy of emphasis is the fact that MacNeice actually enjoyed his years as a public schoolboy, a matter of some psychological rarity among English poets. He had "a glorious term" (his words) at Sherborne before sitting the scholarship exam for Marlborough, and at this second school, where life "was generally tough and occasionally barbaric," MacNeice managed to adjust and flourish, writing Yeatsian verse and picking up the literary magazine's aesthetic affectations. The latter were abetted by sharing a study with the already odious Anthony Blunt, who would eventually be exposed as the fourth man in another Thirties quadrumvirate. "Under Blunt's influence, the dutiful son of the rectory was fast becoming a sceptical rebel, who wanted cornfields to look like landscapes by Van Gogh." MacNeice cast off such adolescence as Blunt grew further into it, and their friendship was not fated to last. Besides, as Blunt himself would recall, "Louis was always, totally, irredeemably heterosexual."

Once at Oxford, MacNeice "found that most of his undergraduate contemporaries fell into one of three categories: the studious, the aesthetes (though these were pale shadows of their Wildean predecessors), and the hearties." Stallworthy sees it as a "problem—probably unperceived, certainly unadmitted"—that MacNeice "had interests in common with some of each camp," though others might regard this, in a young person, as a sign of mental health, or, in a poet, negative capability. Certainly it helped to foster the distaste for cant and ideology that Stallworthy finds appealing and which made MacNeice different from so many poets of his generation. He lacked their temporary certainties, especially in politics. Possessed instead of what Stallworthy calls "Orwellian honesty," he offered this answer to the question "Do you take your stand with any political or politico-economic party or creed?" in Geoffrey Grigson's famous 1934 *New Verse* survey: "No. In weaker moments I wish I could."

In the July 1933 *New Verse*, Day Lewis published a poem called "The Conflict," which welcomed the "red advance of life" and declared that "only ghosts can live/ Between two fires." MacNeice had a natural preference for complexity, and in an "Ode" he wrote during that same period, and which Stallworthy correctly connects to his *New Verse* answers, the poet made a wish:

> let not my son, halving the truth
> Be caught between jagged edges;
> And let him not falsify the world
> By taking it to pieces;
> The marriage of Cause and Effect, Form and Content
> Let him not part asunder

Day Lewis's "two fires" were not just Communism and fascism but a more general



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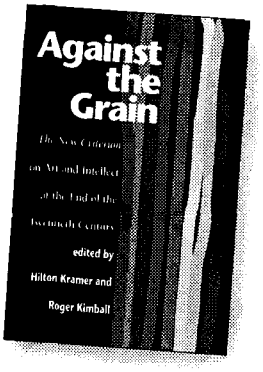
"No one who reads this volume can be in any doubt what the cultural war in the U.S. is all about, or who ought to win it."
—Paul Johnson, *The Wall Street Journal*

# Against the Grain

*The New Criterion* on Art and Intellect at the End of the Twentieth Century
*edited by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball*




An abundant selection of incisive writings from the magazine that has emerged as the foremost voice of critical dissent in the culture wars now raging throughout American society. *The New Criterion,* writes Paul Johnson, "upholds the highest civilized standards in our culture and combats the new barbarism." Written with wit, clarity, and fierce independence, *Against the Grain* is a major contribution to sanity and common sense on the most contentious cultural issues of the day.

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dialectic stoked by the poet himself. The eventual uniformity in which the Communists hoped to see argument and all else come to an end was distasteful to MacNeice's variegated spirit. His own 1933 poem "To a Communist" can stand as a kind of counter-image to Day Lewis's:

> Your thoughts make shape like snow; in one night only
> The gawky earth grows breasts,
> Snow's unity engrosses
> Particular pettiness of stones and grasses.
> But before you proclaim the millennium, my dear,
> Consult the barometer—
> This poise is perfect but maintained
> For one day only.

MacNeice also rejected the pylons and Stakhanovite machinery with which the Left poets of the period liked to stock their verses, as if they were completing five-year plans. His own "April Manifesto" named "Sharp sun-strop, surface-gloss, and momentary caprice" as things to cherish beyond bridges and embankments. His honest doubt would save him from more than Communist chic, and one wonders (putting on Stallworthy's Freudian spectacles) if the healthiest moment of MacNeice's childhood wasn't the glimpse he got of the glittering, unsinkable *Titanic* setting forth on its maiden voyage.

By 1935, as he was hitting his poetic stride, his wife, Mary, deserted him for another man. The blow "put Louis in touch—as never before—with the world and its woes." But his emotional maturity allowed him to do, in his work, what doctrinaire Left poets had decided was impermissible: to treat his own woes and the world's as if they were similar in nature and proportion, suited for the deceptively offhand verse one finds in his masterpiece, arguably the greatest long poem of the period, *Autumn Journal* (1939). He described it to his Faber publisher, T. S. Eliot, as containing "rapportage, metaphysics, ethics, lyrical emotion, autobiography,



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nightmare," with "a constant interrelation of abstract & concrete." He promised that its generalizations would be "balanced by pictures" and its writing so direct "anyone could understand it."

It is one of those grand kitchen-sink poems, a running commentary on the capacious order of *Don Juan* or, more recently, James Merrill's *Changing Light at Sandover*, something that becomes visionary by focusing on one particular after another, and recognizing, above and beyond all else, that "None of our hearts are pure, we always have mixed motives." Its sensuous, back-and-forth autobiography takes MacNeice through Marlborough schooldays and the Munich crisis, his failed marriage, his native country ("Scholars and saints my eye, the land of ambush"), and the Spanish Republic ("ripe as an egg for revolt and ruin"). Every idealization is checked by wit and doubt, as in this famous passage about teaching the "Glory that was Greece" to his students at Bedford College:

> And when I should remember the paragons
> of Hellas
> I think instead
> Of the crooks, the adventurers, the opportunists,
> The careless athletes and the fancy boys,
> The hair-splitters, the pedants, the hard-boiled
> sceptics
> And the Agora and the noise
> Of the demagogues and the quacks; and the
> women pouring
> Libations over graves
> And the trimmers at Delphi and the dummies
> at Sparta and lastly
> I think of the slaves.

And for all this sort of thing, the poem ends with one of the most beautiful, and hopeful, lullabies in modern English.

His verse creed (he was "for *impure* poetry") squared with his anti-utopian personal code. "The world to-day consists of specialists and intransigents," he wrote in 1938. "The poet, by contrast, should be synoptic and elastic in his sympathies." He reached some of his best moments with what Stallworthy calls "verse journalism," something suited to the Thirties, "a decade fascinated by documentation." Mass-Observation, the pop sociology outfit that recorded everyday doings, described itself, again in *New Verse*, with a doctrinaire pomposity that would have amused MacNeice:

> MASS-OBSERVATION is a technique for obtaining objective statements about human behaviour. The primary *use* of these statements is to the other observers: an interchange of observations being the foundation of social consciousness. The statements are useful also to scientists who can each utilize them in his own way. The number of scientific interpretations of a given body of material is only limited by the number of interpreters. Poetically, the statements are also useful. They produce a poetry which is not, as at present, restricted to a handful of esoteric performers.

But MacNeice's success, and perhaps his eventual endurance, lies not just in skill with specifics, but in his stylish, unbamboozled manner: the stiff upper lip softened by the dangling cigarette; the manliness of himself and his work.

As the Second World War got underway, he embarked upon a long career at the BBC. His wartime scripts—including one "about the Athenian general Xenophon, hero of a fighting retreat (like that of the British Expeditionary Force to Dunkirk)"—may have amounted to a kind of propaganda, but he was no more compromised by them than Orwell himself would be by radio work. [1] The real argument about his two decades in broadcasting involves their effect on his creativity. He was aware of "all the vulgarisation involved, the predominance of *quantitative* values," but found that "it *has* its excitements & (what was less to be expected) its value."

The job did stretch on for longer than

1 See *Orwell: The War Commentaries*, edited by W. J. West; Pantheon, 1986.



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it should have, and too much of his post-war life was taken up preparing Commonwealth-boosting programs from India, Ghana, and other balky dominions, but one should resist the temptation to harp on how all this may have slackened his poetry until one has contemplated how else he would have made his living: continuing to teach the "Glory that was Greece" and marking another twenty years' worth of essays. Most of the academics who write literary history are disinclined to admit the soul-killing drudgery of the way most writers keep themselves afloat, preferring to perpetuate the fiction that the teaching of literature is somehow a natural extension of its production. On the BBC question, Stallworthy manages to be evenhanded, perhaps to the point of inconclusiveness.

For a short life, MacNeice's had a rather long denouement. The radio job became itself more bureaucratic and less creative, and his initially passionate second marriage, to the singer Hedli Anderson, wore itself out with quarreling, depression, flings, and drink. As early as 1955 he pronounced himself "finished as a poet"; certainly as the early Sixties came around, his best work was behind him. He had already attempted an *Autumn Sequel* and toward the end was doing a commissioned book on astrology. Even so, his biographer declares that the "controlled delicacy of the many poems of MacNeice's last three years is the more remarkable when seen in connection with the increasing loss of control in his drinking," and he provides enough evidence to make the judgment more than a kindness.

Stallworthy reads the work in a manner that now seems quaint ("The remoteness of husband and wife at opposite ends of the world is skilfully reinforced by the remoteness of the rhymes 'silver'/ 'ever' at the opposite ends of the verse") and, on occasion, leaden: "although the Sitwellian influence is dominant in his own poems appearing regularly (and anonymously) in *The Marlburian*, an Eliotelian note is almost certainly audible in at least one." But he has avoided pumping a lot of theory into the corpus, and any moralizing into the corpse. The book has good sense if not high style, and the absence of one from the other somehow serves to remind the reader of the lovely dance those two things did in the poems of Louis MacNeice.

# Shorter notices

*John Y. Simon, editor*
"General Grant" by Matthew Arnold,
with a Rejoinder by Mark Twain.
Kent State University Press,
72 pages, $7 paper

Just when it seemed that both the City of New York and the federal government were willing to let Grant's Tomb, on upper Fifth Avenue, sink into neglect, desuetude, and decay, with few to protest this indignity to an American president and a national monument, along has come a curious publication of the Ulysses S. Grant Association. I hope that this Association has the requisite power to shame the politicians (which would be a great deal of power indeed, as politicians have little enough shame) into repairing and renovating and protecting the resting place of one of the great heroes of the Republic.

In any case, the curious publication is *"General Grant" by Matthew Arnold, with a Rejoinder by Mark Twain*. This item is in fact the second edition of the 1966 publication that launched the Association's massive edition of *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*. John Y. Simon, the director of that edition, which now comprises twenty volumes, has written a new introduction.

The interest of this little book lies in Matthew Arnold's long two-part review, published in *Murray's Magazine* in 1886, of the *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*. Arnold's aim was ostensibly to make British readers aware of an impressive, neglected military memoir by a taciturn general who had previously, in person, seemed to Arnold to have no recognizable point of interest. Arnold's review—which elegantly and accurately summarized the principal facts of Grant's



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life, his military career, and his stunning Civil War victories—is on the whole quite complimentary. It is not, however, perfectly controlled in tone. And when the *Murray's* review was picked up, reprinted, and circulated in America, it raised a firestorm of protest.

One of the most vociferous protesters was Mark Twain. His speech at the Annual Reunion of the Army and Navy Club of Connecticut on April 27, 1887 (Grant's birthday), is the rejoinder indicated in the booklet's title. I think it fair to say that Twain was an anglophobe who deeply resented the snobbishness of Arnold and his condescension to civilization in the United States. In any case, Arnold—as the spokesman for "the best that has been thought and said in the world"—had complained at the tendency of Americans to brag that anything American, however mediocre, was the simply best durn thing going. Further, he had called America's vulgar newspapers an offense to decency. And, finally, Arnold claimed that the low condition of American culture was defined by our addiction to "phunny phellows" such as Artemus Ward, Petroleum V. Nasby, and E. Epamonidas Adrastus Blab (a.k.a. Sam'l L. Clemens or Mark Twain). This criticism of rowdy newspapermen and platform comedians was a one-two punch to Twain, a professional instance of both; but he got his revenge in the uproarious rejoinder.

More than these complaints, however, what seemed to inflame American readers was Arnold's criticism of Grant's bad grammar, his uncertain use of "shall" and "will," and the description of the plain style of the *Memoirs* as "an English without charm and without high breeding." Twain, for one, went ballistic. In his rejoinder he pointed out that the English prose styles that supposedly reflect high breeding are all of them full of grammatical errors. And he cited the Englishman Henry H. Breen's *Modern English Literature: Its Blemishes and Defects* as listing scores of grammatical lapses in Sheridan, Carlyle, Macaulay, Shakespeare, Milton, *et al.* Then, turning on Arnold's essay, Twain picked it to pieces to the roar of the veterans and reproduced a long Arnold passage, hopelessly obscure in its pronoun references, of which he said: "To read that passage a couple of times would make a man dizzy, to read it four times would make him drunk." Arnold's prose, then, was for Twain no better than Grant's. For all its bluntness of style, Grant's *Memoirs* was "a great, (and in its peculiar department) unique and unapproachable literary masterpiece."

Twain sincerely believed in Grant's book and hoped others would like it. Of course he was not completely disinterested. The Charles L. Webster Company—which published and sold the *Memoirs* by subscription, and dispersed its agents throughout the land under orders to sell a copy to every household in America—was in fact a Twain family enterprise. Now let's get that Tomb repaired.

*—James W. Tuttleton*

*Marjorie Garber*
Vice Versa: Bisexuality and
the Eroticism of Everyday Life.
Simon & Schuster, 606 pages, $30

Books like this remind me of a familiar bumper sticker: *If you can read this, you're too damn close.* If you're seriously interested in reading a six-hundred-page study of bisexuality (or anything else) by a professor of English at Harvard, you probably don't care what this review says. That goes double for Marjorie Garber, whose previous books include *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, whose current dust jacket sports effusive quotes from Gore Vidal, Alice Walker, Wayne Koestenbaum, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (by their blurbs ye shall know them), and who is somewhat less than likely to lose many hours of sleep should she learn that *The New Criterion* got a bit huffy over her latest. So I'll keep it short: This isn't a book. It's a bloated compendium of everything Garber knows, or thinks she knows, about bisexuality, with a bagful of literary theory stirred in like flour to thicken the drippings. The whole thing suggests



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a less, shall we say, heterodox version of Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae*, and was doubtless intended to come across that way. (Dead giveaway: Garber dismisses *Sexual Personae* as "a hodgepodge of watered-down Nietzsche and warmed-over Jung." You wish, baby.) Here endeth the sermon. But I do want to share a few cultural nuggets gleaned from the pages of *Vice Versa*—dispatches from the front, so to speak:

Bisexuality may be chic, but it is also politically incorrect. Many exasperated queer theorists view it as an underhanded way of obtaining "heterosexual privilege" while simultaneously savoring the joys of gay sex. As Garber reports: "When the *San Francisco Bay Times* added the word 'bisexual' to its masthead, . . . becoming 'The Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Newspaper & Calendar of Events for the Bay Area,' not all its readers were pleased by the change. Letters to the editor, Kim Corsaro, demanded to know her sexual orientation and that of her staff members, 'so that we can judge for ourselves if the *SF Bay Times* represents us,' according to a letter signed by five lesbians. 'For the record,' Corsaro wrote, 'I am a lesbian. I do not have a bisexual lover.' Her staff was made up, she said, of '26 lesbians, 23 gay men, 5 bisexuals and 3 hets.'"

Some cutting-edge coinages: "biphobia"; "ambisexuality"; "L.U.G." (Lesbian Until Graduation); "opposite-sex-same-sexuality" (meaning that you have heterosexual sex, but it *feels* like homosexual sex, so it's P.C.).

Some journals of bisexuality: *North Bi Northwest*, *Bi-Girl World*, *Anything That Moves* (*that* one I like).

Last but not least: a group of trendy teenagers at Hunter High School, located on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, has formed the 10 Percent Club. (Obviously, these kids don't read the papers.) According to a story in *The New York Times* cited by Garber, none of the members claims to be exclusively homosexual. "Everyone's bisexual," the president explains. There's just one catch: "Every one of the bisexuals interviewed said they'd [*sic*] never had relations with someone of their [*sic*] own sex." To which the perfect comeback was supplied roughly a century ago by a noted bisexual who, not surprisingly, figures prominently in the pages of *Vice Versa*: "I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and really being good all the time. That would be hypocrisy."

—*Terry Teachout*

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*Editor's note:* Readers are reminded that *The New Criterion* does not publish in July or August. Our next issue will appear in September.



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Notebook

# Obedience to the unenforceable

*by John Silber*

Seventy-five years ago, John Fletcher Moulton, Lord Moulton, a noted English judge, spoke on the subject of "Law and Manners." He divided human action into three domains. At one extreme is the domain of law, "where," he said, "our actions are prescribed by laws binding upon us which must be obeyed." At the other extreme is the domain of free choice, "which," he said, "includes all those actions as to which we claim and enjoy complete freedom." Between these two, Lord Moulton said, lies a domain in which our actions are not determined by law but in which we are not free to behave in any way we choose. In this domain we act with greater or lesser freedom from constraint, on a continuum that extends from a consciousness of duty "nearly as strong as positive law," through a sense of what is required by public spirit, to "good form" appropriate in a given situation, and so on up to the border with the domain of free choice, where there is no constraint whatever on what we may choose to do.

Lord Moulton considered the area of action lying between law and pure personal preference to be "the domain of obedience to the unenforceable." In this domain, he said, "Obedience is the obedience of a man to that which he cannot be forced to obey. He is the enforcer of the law upon himself." This domain between law and free choice he called that of "manners." While it may include moral duty, social responsibility, and proper behavior, it extends beyond them to cover "all cases of doing right where there is no one to make you do it but yourself."

Both the domains of law and free choice threaten to encroach upon the middle domain of manners. Moulton's central point, one of capital importance, is that "the real greatness of a nation, its true civilization, is measured by the extent of this land of obedience to the unenforceable. It measures the extent to which the nation trusts its citizens, and its area testifies to the way they behave in response to that trust."

In America today the domains of choice and law have eroded the domain of manners. As the realm of manners and morals has been diminished by those who claim that whatever they do is right if it feels good to them, the central domain loses its force. And despite the expansion of the domain of law, the consequent weakening of the central domain has resulted in a diminution of the authority and effectiveness of the law.

We live in a deeply flawed society and are moving rapidly toward that state of nature which Thomas Hobbes chillingly described: "No arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary,

This essay is adapted from a speech delivered on May 21, 1995, to the graduating class of Boston University, on the occasion of Dr. Silber's twenty-fifth commencement as president of B.U.



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poor, nasty, brutish and short." We cannot end this state of violence and restore the authority of law simply by getting tough on crime, by relying on the police power of the state, or by calling for capital punishment. As both Hobbes and Lord Moulton observed, the sovereign cannot establish his authority by force alone. Authority and civil order depend in a significant measure on the consent of the governed—that is, on obedience to the unenforceable. The more civilized and enlightened the country, the greater its dependence on the voluntary respect and support of its citizens for law and civil order. The rule of law depends on the morality of the people—and that, regrettably, is in precipitous decline.

We must not attribute all our social ills to a single cause, however, for the causes are many. If families had not broken up, if churches had not lost much of their influence, if there had not been an extensive spread of secularism and materialism, if the quality of our schools had not declined despite substantial increases in financial support, if drugs had not become easily available, if some or all of these factors had not been present, we might have withstood the degenerative effects of television and its incessant advocacy of pleasure.

Prior to television and to the breakup of the family, parents typically tried to preserve and extend the ceremonies of innocence in the lives of their children by shielding them from the sordid dimensions of human life—from filthy language, premature exposure to sex, and mindless, indiscriminate violence. But that is now the common experience of children: by age four or five they speak the language of the gutter, and as teenagers enlarge their experience of violence, obscenity, and sex in all its varieties through television (watched on the average for twenty-five hours a week), the movies, and, occasionally, even the schools.

Television is the most important educational institution in the United States today. Since the beginning of human history mankind has known what Aristotle later set down as the fundamental fact about education: *We learn by imitation*. Why else would English children learn English instead of German? Or German children learn German instead of Spanish? Children mimic what they hear. And what they see they also do. It is as simple as that.

Common sense tells us that violence endlessly enacted on television serves as a model for imitation. In many of our great cities we find teenagers, in imitation of what they have seen scores of times on television, engaged in wanton acts of violence, blowing away parents, friends, or strangers with a totally amoral, psychopathological indifference to the suffering of others. Even if most youths do not imitate the violent acts they have witnessed, the deluge of television violence infects their sensibilities. Revulsion and abhorrence, our natural reactions to violence, are suppressed. We become reconciled to violence as though it were a normal part of life, as indeed it has become. Mark Antony made the point when, standing over Caesar's dead body, he prophesied:

> Blood and destruction shall be so in use,
> And dreadful objects so familiar,
> That mothers shall but smile when they behold
> Their infants quartered with the hands of war,
> All pity choked with custom of fell deeds . . .

And now new opportunities are open for our youth as the Internet makes available to anyone accessing it simple straightforward directions for the manufacture of bombs. But our government, which has found it necessary to regulate formulas for ice cream and peanut butter, is reluctant to prohibit the distribution on the Internet of handbooks for terrorists. Such communication threatens our lives in a way that shouting "Fire!" in a crowded theater could never do. Can anyone seriously believe that the First Amendment protects instruction in terrorism through the Internet? Its prohibition clearly meets Mr. Justice Holmes's test of a clear and present danger. It may be technically impossible to control terrorism on the Internet, but that difficulty should not be confused with a constitutional protection.



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The level of insensitivity engendered in many of our youth in the last few years is not due exclusively to television and the entertainment industry. On the other hand, it cannot be explained in the absence of television, for there are no other factors adequate in themselves to account for it. Nevertheless, if the influence of television and films were countered by a strong family, a first-rate educational system, or good job opportunities in inner cities, the impact of television would be far less significant and perhaps even negligible.

It has not had an equal influence on all children by any means. Children from strong homes, children attending vital churches and deeply nurtured by religious traditions, children who have developed sound study habits and who in consequence have little time for television, children who have developed a moral center to guide their choices—all seem remarkably immune.

As television has ravenously consumed our attention, it has weakened the formative institutions of family, church, and school, thoroughly eroding the sense of individual obedience to the unenforceable on which manners and morals and ultimately the law depend. Obviously, we need to rebuild our families, our churches, and our schools. But we cannot complete these reforms until something is done about television, for in both its advertising and its programming it has created demands that appeal, not to the best in our natures, but to the worst.

Alarmed by the deterioration of standards, and recognizing one clear source of this decline, we may be tempted to enlarge the domain of law by regulating television and the entertainment industry. But this should give us pause.

I do not advocate altering the First Amendment, nor do I advocate congressional limits on what television stations can broadcast. But isn't it time for those who own television stations and networks, and those who own motion-picture companies that supply television programs, to demonstrate *their* obedience to the unenforceable?

Let the First Amendment stand as it is. But the moguls of television and movies should recognize that they are contributing directly to the erosion, not only of morals and manners, but of the rule of law itself. Are they going to show obedience to the unenforceable by asserting their moral responsibility for the good of our society, or is the pursuit of profit their only guide?

If the television and entertainment industries do not control themselves in obedience to the unenforceable, we shall soon reach the point where programming on television threatens the life of the Republic. But will the American people recognize that it poses a clear and present danger calling for decisive, corrective action?

There is still time for self-correction. But those in positions of responsibility in these industries should understand that we cannot continue indefinitely to tolerate their trashing of our and our children's sensibilities without endangering our survival. The barbarians television has nurtured and continues to nurture are not at our gates but in our midst. Recognizing that, by its nature, obedience to the unenforceable cannot be enforced, W. Edwards Deming observed: "You don't have to do it—survival is not compulsory."

The crisis we face will not be solved by higher or lower taxes, by more or less welfare or Medicaid, by larger or smaller budgets for the military or the police. Our crisis, like that confronting the peoples of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, is, as Solzhenitsyn observed, a crisis of moral decay.

We face a crisis of the spirit. Its resolution far transcends the power of the state; it is a crisis too important, too far-reaching, to be resolved by mere governmental action. Its resolution, rather, is in our hands. When we determine to govern ourselves, we shall have regained control over ourselves and thus regained our capacity for self-government. The future of our country, our future happiness and that of our children, depends decisively on whether we as individuals and as a people practice obedience to the unenforceable.



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(*& Hilton Kramer*) Farewell to the MLA, *on the 110th annual convention of the Modern Language Association, in San Diego, California, December 1994*, Feb., 5;
Exhibition note *on* Thomas Cole: Landscape into History *at the Brooklyn Museum* (Art), Feb., 47;
The grammar of "Dissent," *on* Dissent *magazine at age 40*, Mar., 8;
Christopher Lasch vs. the elites, *on Mr. Lasch's book* The Revolt of the Elites, Apr., 9;
Art vs. aestheticism: the case of Walter Pater, *on a new biography of Pater by Denis Donoghue*, May, 11;
What's left of Descartes?, *on a new biography of Descartes by Stephen Gaukroger*, June, 8;
Exhibition note *on* Nature Vivante: The Still Lifes of John La Farge *at the Jordan–Volpe Gallery, New York* (Art), June, 49
*Kistler, William* Music from an evening sphere (Poem), Dec., 37



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*Kramer, Hilton* Life after liberalism: "The New Republic" at 80, Sept., 4;
Exhibition note *on* Manny Farber: New Paintings *at the Frumkin/Adams Gallery, New York* (ART), Oct., 53;
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At the Warhol Museum, Dec., 6;
Samuel Lipman, 1934–1994, Jan., 5;
(*& Roger Kimball*) Farewell to the MLA, *on the 110th annual convention of the Modern Language Association, in San Diego, California, December 1994*, Feb., 5;
Kandinsky & the birth of abstraction, *on* Kandinsky: Compositions *at the Museum of Modern Art, New York*, Mar., 3;
Getting to know Pissarro, *on* Camille Pissarro: Impressionist Innovator *at the Jewish Museum, New York*, Apr., 5;
The Edmund Wilson centenary, *on a new biography of Wilson by Jeffrey Meyers*, May, 5;
The BBC & other losses, *a letter from London*, June, 4;
Exhibition note *on* Nadar *at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York* (ART), June, 50

*Logan, William* Lowell in the shadows, *a review of* Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell *by Paul Mariani* (BOOKS), Dec., 61;
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*Lourie, Richard* The self-pitier (Poem), Oct., 46
*Lyons, Donald* Shorter notice *of* Satire & Sentiment, 1660–1830 *by Claude Rawson* (BOOKS), Sept., 89;
Not worth the powder, *a review of* Witches & Jesuits: Shakespeare's "Macbeth" *by Garry Wills* (BOOKS), Feb., 67;
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Shorter notice *of* A Dead Man in Deptford *by Anthony Burgess* (BOOKS), May, 79

*Mallon, Thomas* Autumn epitaph, *a review of* Louis MacNeice *by Jon Stallworthy* (BOOKS), June, 81
*Mansfield, Harvey C., Jr.* Friends & founders, *a review of* The Republic of Letters: The Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson & James Madison *edited by John Morton Smith* (BOOKS), May, 69
*Morgan, Frederick* May night (Poem), Oct., 44;
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*Morrone, Francis* This was New York?, *a review of* Scenes from the Life of a City *by Eric Homberger* (BOOKS), Dec., 70;
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*Naves, Mario* Exhibition note *on* Dalí: The Early Years *at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York* (ART), Sept., 54;
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Pop goes Parnassus, *on the world of contemporary poetry as viewed by* The New York Times Magazine, Mar., 1;
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Peter Brooks's complaint, *on Mr. Brooks's essay* Frightened with False Fire: Misunderstandings of the Culture War *in the* TLS, June, 1

*Ozick, Cynthia* Against modernity: the American Academy in the '20s, *on the American Academy of Arts & Letters under the direction of Charles Underwood Johnson*, Sept., 19

*Page, Tim* Webern after Webernism, *on the posthumous reputation of Anton Webern* (MUSIC), Apr., 38
*Penrose, James F.* The legacy of Donald Francis Tovey, Nov., 16

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*Richman, Robert* Shorter notice *of* The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou (BOOKS), Mar., 79;
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*Rosenthal, Deborah* Redon: the subjective world, *on* Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams, 1840–1916 *at the Art Institute of Chicago* (ART), Dec., 38
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*Sartarelli, Stephen* The literary stakes, *on the new "conservative" critics on the French literary scene* (LETTER FROM PARIS), June, 43
*Schiffren, Lisa* The greatest show on earth?, *on the current, "multicultural" edition of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus* (NOTES & COMMENTS), May, 3
*Schmertz, Mildred* Exhibition note *on* Rem Koolhaas & the Place of Public Architecture *at the Museum of Modern Art, New York* (ART), Dec., 45
*Shomer, Enid* Cadillac (Poem), Oct., 42
*Silber, John* Obedience to the unenforceable, *a commencement address* (NOTEBOOK), June, 88
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*Teachout, Terry* So terribly correct, *a review of* Dictatorship of Virtue *by Richard Bernstein &* Two Steps Ahead of the Thought Police *by John Leo* (BOOKS), Sept., 82;
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*Thomson, William* He went to Yale (Letter), Feb., 80
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Absolute James, *a review of* The Father: A Life of Henry James, Sr. *by Alfred Habegger* (BOOKS), Apr., 65;
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*Wilkin, Karen* Serendipity in Milan: "Drawing in Our Century," *on* Il Disegno del Nostro Secolo *at the Fondazione Antonio Mazzotta* (ART), Sept., 50;
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*Winegarten, Renee* A concept of liberty: Benjamin Constant, Feb., 30;
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*Wolcott, James* Gass attack, *a review of* The Tunnel *by William H. Gass* (BOOKS), Feb., 63

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*Bernstein, Richard* Dictatorship of Virtue: Multiculturalism & the Battle for America's Future (*Terry Teachout*), Sept., 82
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*Bindman, David, general editor* Blake's Illuminated Books (*Daniel Mark Epstein*), Oct., 10
*Bioy Casares, Adolfo* Selected Stories (*Alexander Coleman*), Oct., 65
*Blanchard, Paula* Sarah Orne Jewett: Her World & Her Work (*Louis Auchincloss*), Sept., 76
*Bloom, Harold* The Western Canon: The Books & School of the Ages (*Paul Dean*), Nov., 58
*Brown, Frederick* Zola: A Life (*Daniel J. Silver*), May, 65
*Bruccoli, Matthew J.* Fitzgerald & Hemingway: A Dangerous Friendship *& as editor (with Judith S. Baughan)* F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters (*James W. Tuttleton*), Nov., 24
*Burgess, Anthony* A Dead Man in Deptford (*Donald Lyons*), May, 79
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*Cobbett, William* Peter Porcupine in America: Pamphlets on Republicanism & Revolution *edited by David A. Wilson* (*Richard Brookhiser*), Sept., 85
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*Eliot, T. S.* The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry *edited & with an introduction by Ronald Schuchard* (*Paul Dean*), Oct., 75
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*Simon, John Y., editor* "General Grant" by Matthew Arnold, with a Rejoinder by Mark Twain (*James W. Tuttleton*), June, 85
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*Verne, Jules* Paris au XXe siècle *edited by Piero Gondolo della Riva* (*Renee Winegarten*), Apr., 62
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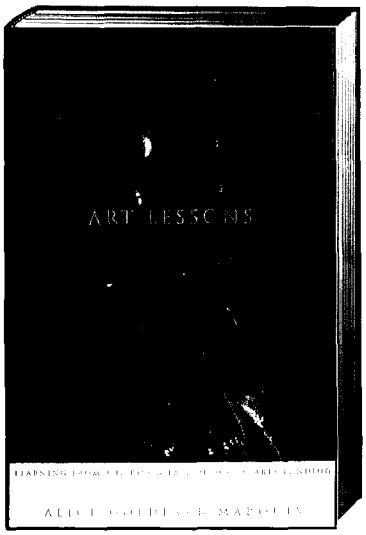


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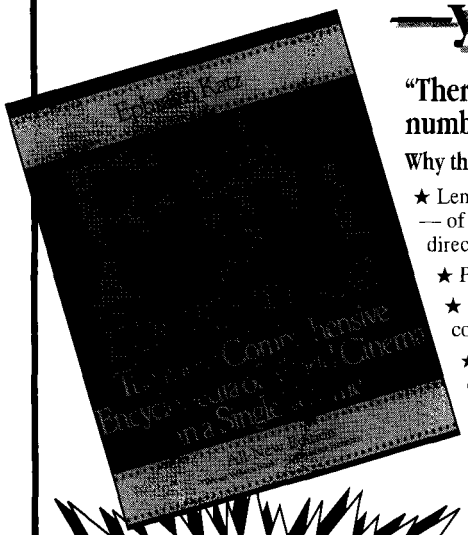


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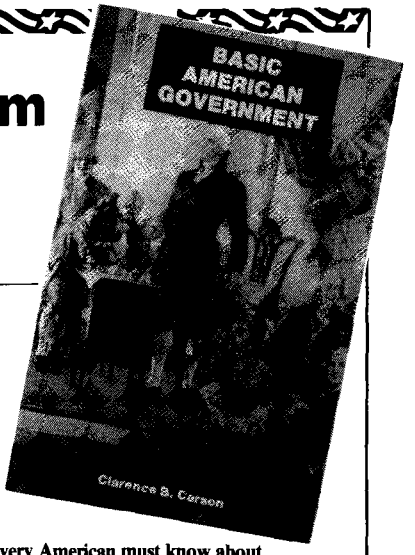


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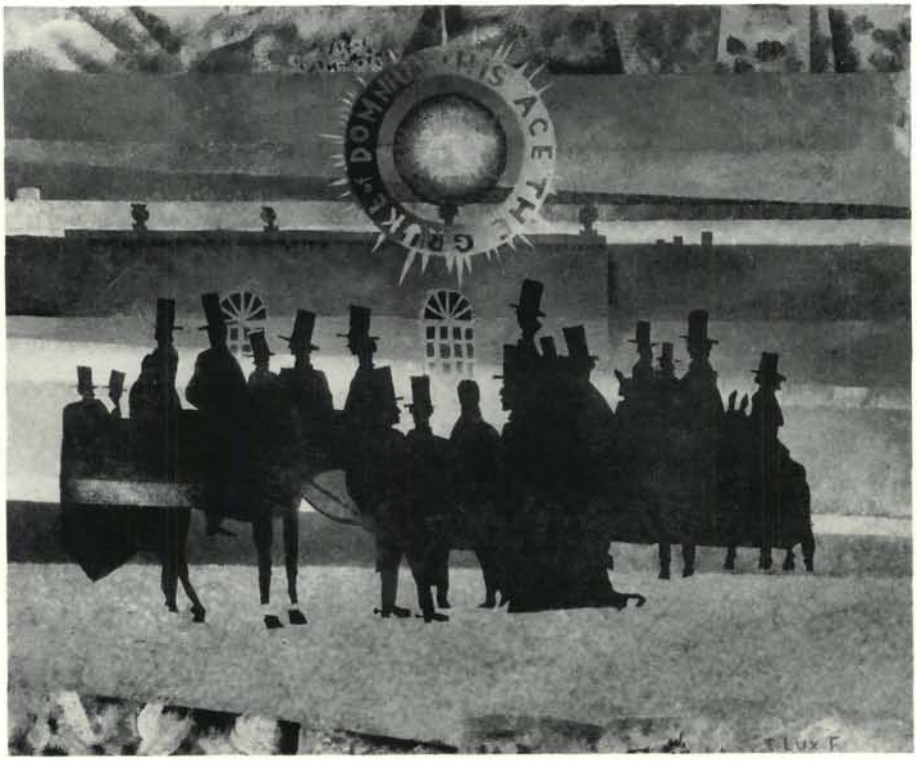


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